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THE
ENTIRE WORKS
OF THE
REV. CHARLES SIMEON, M.A.
WITH COPIOUS INDEXES,
PREPARED BY THE REV.
THOMAS HARTWELL HORNE, B.D.

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HORÆ HOMILETICÆ:

OR

DISCOURSES

(PRINCIPALLY IN THE FORM OF SKELETONS)

NOW FIRST DIGESTED INTO ONE CONTINUED SERIES,

AND FORMING A COMMENTARY

UPON EVERY BOOK OF

THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT;

TO WHICH IS ANNEXED,

AN IMPROVED EDITION OF A TRANSLATION OF

CLAUDE'S ESSAY ON THE COMPOSITION OF A SERMON.

IN TWENTY-ONE VOLUMES.

✓
BY THE REV. CHARLES SIMEON, M.A.

SENIOR FELLOW OF KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

VOL. III.

JUDGES TO SECOND BOOK OF KINGS.

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CONTENTS TO VOL. III.

Discourse.	Text.	Subject.	Page.
JUDGES			
261.	i. 6, 7.	<i>Adoni-bezek's Punishment</i>	1
262.	ii. 1—5.	<i>The Danger of Indecision</i>	6
263.	iii. 20.	<i>Ehud and Eglon</i>	12
264.	v. 24—27.	<i>Jael and Sisera</i>	16
265.	v. 31.	<i>The Prayer of Deborah</i>	20
266.	vi. 36—40.	<i>Gideon's Fleece</i>	23
267.	vii. 19—22.	<i>Gideon's Victory over Midian</i>	29
268.	viii. 1—3.	<i>Gideon pacifies the Ephraimites . .</i>	33
269.	viii. 4.	<i>Faint, yet pursuing</i>	38
270.	viii. 15—17.	<i>Gideon chastises the Men of Succoth and Penuel</i>	43
271.	ix. 7—15.	<i>Jotham's Parable</i>	47
272.	xi. 30, 31.	<i>Jephthah's Vow</i>	53
273.	xiii. 22, 23.	<i>Manoah's Vision</i>	63
274.	xiv. 12—14.	<i>Samson's Riddle</i>	66
275.	xvi. 28.	<i>Samson's Character and End</i>	72
276.	xvii. 13.	<i>Micah's false Confidence</i>	77
277.	xxi. 25.	<i>The Benjamites' Wickedness</i>	83
RUTH			
278.	i. 15—17.	<i>The Character of Ruth</i>	89
279.	i. 19.	<i>The Changes made by Time and Cir- cumstances</i>	95
280.	ii. 4.	<i>Boaz and his Reapers</i>	100
281.	ii. 11, 12.	<i>Ruth's Piety and Reward</i>	102
I SAMUEL			
282.	ii. 1—10.	<i>Hannah's Song of Thanksgiving . .</i>	109
283.	ii. 25.	<i>The Danger of neglecting the great Sacrifice</i>	113
284.	ii. 30.	<i>Eli's Unfaithfulness reproved</i>	126
285.	iii. 18.	<i>Eli's Submission to the Divine rebukes</i>	130
286.	iv. 13.	<i>Eli's Anxiety for the Ark of God . .</i>	133

Discourse.	Text.	Subject.	Page.
	1 SAMUEL		
287.	vi. 20.	<i>The Ark returned to Bethshemesh . .</i>	137
288.	vii. 8, 9.	<i>Samuel's successful Intercession . .</i>	141
289.	vii. 12.	<i>Memorials of God's Goodness . . .</i>	145
290.	vii. 12.	<i>The Duty of commemorating God's Mer-</i> <i>cies</i>	150
291.	vii. 15—17.	<i>Samuel's judicial Character</i>	154
292.	x. 12.	<i>Conversion a Ground of Joy</i>	159
293.	xii. 16—23.	<i>The Israelites' Rejection of Samuel re-</i> <i>proved</i>	166
294.	xii. 23, 24.	<i>Devotion to God urged from a Sense of</i> <i>Gratitude</i>	171
295.	xiii. 11—13.	<i>Saul's Impatience</i>	175
296.	xiv. 6.	<i>Jonathan's Victory over the Philistines</i>	179
297.	xv. 11.	<i>Mourning for the Sins of others . .</i>	182
298.	xv. 13—16.	<i>Saul's Self-deceit</i>	187
299.	xv. 22, 23.	<i>Saul's Disobedience and Punishment .</i>	190
300.	xvi. 7.	<i>God inspects the Heart</i>	195
301.	xvii. 29.	<i>David's Vindication of himself . . .</i>	200
302.	xvii. 45, 46.	<i>David and Goliath</i>	204
303.	xviii. 9.	<i>Saul's Envy of David</i>	208
304.	xx. 3.	<i>David's Fear of Saul</i>	213
305.	xxiv. 4—6.	<i>David's Forbearance towards Saul .</i>	217
306.	xxv. 32, 33.	<i>David kept from avenging himself on</i> <i>Nabal</i>	219
307.	xxvii. 1.	<i>The unbelieving Fears of David . .</i>	223
308.	xxviii. 15.	<i>The Witch of Endor</i>	230
309.	xxx. 6.	<i>Encouragement in God</i>	234
	2 SAMUEL		
310.	iii. 31—34.	<i>The Death of Abner</i>	237
311.	vi. 6—9.	<i>Uzzah's Punishment for touching the Ark</i>	242
312.	vi. 14.	<i>David dancing before the Ark . . .</i>	247
313.	vi. 22.	<i>David dancing before the Ark . . .</i>	252
314.	vii. 18, 19.	<i>David's Gratitude</i>	257
315.	vii. 27.	<i>The Promises an Encouragement to</i> <i>Prayer</i>	261
316.	xii. 1—7.	<i>Nathan's Parable</i>	265
317.	xii. 13.	<i>David's Humiliation and Acceptance .</i>	269
318.	xiii. 15.	<i>Amnon and Tamar</i>	274

Discourse.	Text.	Subject.	Page.
	2 SAMUEL		
319.	xv. 25, 26.	<i>David driven from his Throne by Absalom</i>	281
320.	xv. 30.	<i>David's Submission to his Afflictions</i>	286
321.	xvi. 5—12.	<i>David's Patience and Forbearance</i>	289
322.	xviii. 33.	<i>David's Lamentation over Absalom</i>	294
323.	xix. 34.	<i>The Shortness of Life a Ground for Indifference to the Things of this World</i>	299
324.	xxi. 1.	<i>Famine a Punishment for Sin</i>	302
325.	xxiii. 1—4.	<i>The Equity of Christ's Government</i>	305
326.	xxiii. 5.	<i>The Covenant of Grace</i>	308
327.	xxiii. 15—17.	<i>David's Desire for the Water of the Well of Bethlehem</i>	313
328.	xxiv. 11—15.	<i>David numbering the People</i>	316
	1 KINGS		
329.	ii. 44.	<i>Solomon puts Shimei to Death</i>	321
330.	iii. 11—13.	<i>Solomon's Choice</i>	326
331.	vi. 7.	<i>The Stillness with which the Temple was built</i>	329
332.	viii. 18.	<i>Good Intentions approved</i>	334
333.	viii. 28—30.	<i>For the Opening of Trinity Church at Cheltenham</i>	338
334.	viii. 38, 39.	<i>The Requisites for Acceptable Prayer</i>	351
335.	viii. 54—61.	<i>Solomon's Thanksgiving Prayer</i>	354
336.	x. 6, 7.	<i>The Queen of Sheba's Visit to Solomon</i>	358
337.	xi. 9.	<i>Solomon's Fall</i>	364
338.	xii. 24.	<i>Revolt of the Ten Tribes</i>	369
339.	xiii. 4.	<i>Jeroboam's Idolatry reprov'd</i>	374
340.	xiii. 26.	<i>The disobedient Prophet slain</i>	379
341.	xiv. 13.	<i>Abijah's Piety rewarded</i>	385
342.	xvii. 15, 16.	<i>Elijah and the Widow of Sarepta</i>	390
343.	xvii. 22, 23.	<i>The Widow's Son raised by Elijah</i>	393
344.	xviii. 12.	<i>Obadiah's early Piety</i>	398
345.	xviii. 21.	<i>Decision of Character</i>	402
346.	xviii. 24.	<i>Elijah's Challenge to the Prophets of Baal</i>	406
347.	xix. 11—14.	<i>Elijah visited and reprov'd by God</i>	411
348.	xix. 18.	<i>A Remnant in the Worst of Times</i>	415
349.	xix. 21.	<i>Call of Elisha to the prophetic Office</i>	419
350.	xx. 11.	<i>Against Self-confidence</i>	423

Discourse.	Text.	Subject.	Page.
	I KINGS		
351.	xx. 42.	<i>Ahab's Sin in sparing Benhadad . .</i>	425
352.	xxi. 20.	<i>Ahab and Elijah in Naboth's Vineyard</i>	429
353.	xxi. 27—29.	<i>The feigned Repentance of Ahab . .</i>	435
354.	xxii. 8.	<i>Faithful Ministers Objects of Hatred .</i>	439
355.	xxii. 19—23.	<i>Satan's Stratagem to deceive Ahab .</i>	445
	2 KINGS		
356.	i. 11, 12.	<i>Elijah calls down Fire from Heaven .</i>	451
357.	ii. 9—12.	<i>Elijah's Translation to Heaven . . .</i>	456
358.	ii. 14.	<i>Elijah's God</i>	460
359.	ii. 19—22.	<i>Elisha healing the Spring with a Cruse of Salt</i>	464
360.	ii. 23, 24.	<i>Elisha mocked by the Children . . .</i>	468
361.	iii. 27.	<i>The King of Moab sacrifices his Son .</i>	472
362.	iv. 6.	<i>The Widow's Oil increased</i>	476
363.	iv. 13.	<i>Contentment illustrated in the Shunamite</i>	480
364.	iv. 26.	<i>All the Dispensations of Providence are good</i>	484
365.	v. 13.	<i>Naaman healed of his Leprosy . . .</i>	487
366.	v. 18, 19.	<i>Naaman bowing in the House of Rimmon</i>	493
367.	v. 21, 22.	<i>The Hypocrisy of Gehazi</i>	499
368.	vi. 15, 16.	<i>Elisha protected by Chariots of Fire .</i>	502
369.	vii. 18—20.	<i>The unbelieving Lord punished . . .</i>	505
370.	viii. 12.	<i>Elisha predicts the atrocious Acts of Hazeal</i>	509
371.	ix. 36.	<i>The Destruction of Ahab's Family by Jehu</i>	514
372.	x. 16.	<i>True and False Zeal</i>	517
373.	x. 30, 31.	<i>The Character of Jehu</i>	523
374.	xiii. 18, 19.	<i>Elisha's Reproof to Joash</i>	526
375.	xvii. 33.	<i>The Bible Standard of Religion . .</i>	531
376.	xviii. 4.	<i>Hezekiah destroys the brasen Serpent</i>	
377.	xix. 30, 31.	<i>Hezekiah's Deliverance from Senna- cherib</i>	537
			544
378.	xx. 2, 3.	<i>Hezekiah's Appeal to God</i>	547
379.	xx. 19.	<i>Hezekiah's Resignation</i>	550
380.	xx. 19.	<i>The Benefits arising from Peace and Truth</i>	554
381.	xxiii. 3.	<i>Covenanting with God</i>	558
382.	xxiii. 25.	<i>The Character of Josiah</i>	562

J U D G E S.

CCLXI.

ADONI-BEZEK'S PUNISHMENT.

Judg. i. 6, 7. *But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued after him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his great toes. And Adoni-bezek said, Threescore and ten kings, having their thumbs and their great toes cut off, gathered their meat under my table: as I have done, so God hath requited me.*

THERE are times and seasons afforded us for the performance of our duty, which, if they be once lost, can never afterwards be recovered. It was thus with the Israelites in the invasion of Canaan: if they had followed up their successes with becoming zeal, their difficulties would have been comparatively light: but at no time did they advance with that ardour which they should have manifested in such a cause. Joshua had reproved them for their indolence^a, and quickened them in some degree; but still, after his death, and fifteen years after their first invasion of Canaan, no one of the tribes had complete possession of the lot assigned them. The Israelites had increased, and now wanted the whole of their inheritance: but the Canaanites had increased also, and, possessing still their strong-holds, were able to cope with Israel in battle. Now therefore the different tribes found the bitter consequences of their past indifference; and, as it should seem, were afraid to resume a warfare with such potent enemies. However, after having consulted God, Judah, by divine direction, took the lead, and, in conjunction

^a Josh. xviii. 3.

with the tribe of Simeon, renewed the conflict with the Canaanites. God gave them success, and delivered into their hand Adoni-bezek, one of the most powerful of the kings of Canaan. Him they treated with great severity : and their conduct towards him forms the subject of our present consideration. We shall consider,

I. The particular dispensation here recorded—

The conduct of this king had been most cruel—

[What occasions he had had for waging war against seventy kings, we know not: ambition never wants a pretext for its bloody projects: but to insult over their misfortunes in such a manner as to maim their persons, and compel them, like dogs, to gather up scraps from under his table for their subsistence, argued a degree of cruelty, which one could scarcely have conceived to exist in a rational being. One might suppose it possible that some particular provocation might have caused him to offer such an indignity to a single individual; but when such conduct was pursued towards so many vanquished kings, it manifestly proceeded only from his barbarous and brutal disposition. But here we are constrained to acknowledge, how empty is human greatness; how uncertain the continuance of those honours in which men so vainly pride themselves; and how often it happens that pre-eminence in station leads only to a sad pre-eminence in distress and misery. Nor can we forbear to notice, what desolation and trouble one ambitious tyrant may produce in the earth.

Whilst we see the dispositions of this man exhibited in such awful colours, let us not suppose that we ourselves are altogether exempt from them. The truth is, that the dispositions themselves are common to every child of man, though they have not attained in all the same maturity, or brought forth in all such visible and deadly fruits. We cannot but have seen that children feel a pleasure in vexing and tyrannizing over those who are weaker than themselves; and, as we grow up in life, a fondness for manifesting superiority and exercising despotic sway increases: and, in proportion as our opportunities for displaying these hateful qualities are enlarged, our evil tendencies become augmented and confirmed. How conspicuous is this in the great men of the earth, who can spread desolation over whole provinces without remorse, and invade, as we have seen, even neutral and friendly kingdoms for no other end than to gratify their own insatiable ambition!]

But he in his turn was made to feel the judgments which he had so wantonly inflicted upon others—

[It was a law in Israel, that magistrates should punish offenders in a way of just retribution^b: and doubtless it was by the direction of God, the righteous Governor of the universe, that the Israelites on this occasion maimed the body of their captive king. To insult over him indeed, as he had insulted over others, would have been inconsistent with those gracious affections, which Israel, as the Lord's people, were bound to exercise. In that part therefore the sentence was relaxed: but, as far as the law required, they "meted to him the measure which he had meted out to others." This brought his sin to his remembrance, and compelled him to acknowledge the equity of Jehovah, who in his righteous providence had so requited him: "As I have done, so God hath requited me." And though a feeling mind cannot but regret that such a judgment should be executed on a fallen prince, yet in this case we are constrained to acquiesce in it, and even to feel a secret satisfaction, in seeing that the evils which he had so cruelly inflicted upon others were at last brought home to himself.]

Let us now turn our attention from the particular dispensation, to,

II. The insight which it gives us into God's moral government—

"God is still known by the judgments which he executeth"—

[God has not relinquished the government of the earth: he orders and overrules every thing now as much as ever; and in his former dispensations we behold a perfect exhibition of the government which he still administers. Still, as formerly, does he requite the wickedness of men; sometimes *on the offenders themselves*, as when he smote Uzziah with leprosy^c; and sometimes *on others upon their account*; as when he slew seventy thousand of the people, to punish the sin which David had committed in numbering his subjects^d. Sometimes he inflicts the judgment *immediately*, as on Herod who was eaten up with worms^e; and sometimes *after a long season*, as on the sons of Saul for their father's cruelty to the Gibeonites many years before^f. Sometimes his judgments are sent *as a prelude to those heavier judgments that shall be inflicted in the eternal world*, as in the case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram^g; and sometimes *after the offenders themselves have been forgiven*, as was experienced by David in his family^h, and by Manasseh,

^b Lev. xxiv. 19, 20.

^c 2 Chron. xxvi. 19.

^d 2 Sam. xxiv. 15, 17.

^e Acts xii. 23.

^f 2 Sam. xxi. 1, 6, 9.

^g Numb. xvi. 24—35.

^h 2 Sam. xii. 13, 14.

whose iniquities were visited upon Israel after he himself had been received up to gloryⁱ. Sometimes his chastisements had *no particular affinity with the offence committed*, as in the plagues of Egypt; and sometimes *the offence was clearly marked in the punishment*; as in the case of Joram, who had slain all his brothers, and whose children were all, with one exception, consigned to the slaughter^k; and as David, whose wives and concubines were openly defiled by his own son Absalom, just as he himself had defiled the wife of his faithful servant Uriah^l. So minutely is this correspondence marked in the Scriptures, that even *the time* and *the place* are noticed, as designed to manifest the very offence which God designed to punish; as Israel's wandering in the wilderness *forty years* on account of their murmuring at the reports which were brought them by the spies who had searched out the land *forty days*^m; and as Ahab's blood was licked up by dogs, on the very spot where dogs had licked the blood of Naboth, whom he had murderedⁿ.

We might further notice the correspondence between the *spiritual* judgments which God oftentimes inflicts for spiritual transgressions. Those who "will not hearken to *his voice*, he gives up to *their own counsels*^o;" those who *abandon themselves to all manner of wickedness*, he gives up to *vile affections and a reprobate mind*^p; and those who "will not receive his truth in order to salvation, he gives up to *their own delusions, that they may be damned*^q."

We have not prophets indeed at this time to declare the particular instances in which God intends this righteous procedure of his to be discovered: but we have no reason to think that he has altered his system of government, and consequently no reason to doubt but that he still displays his own righteousness in his dispensations, as he has done in every age and quarter of the world. If any imagine that this conduct of his was confined to the nation whose temporal Governor he was, we must remind them, that he dealt precisely in the same way with the heathen nations^r, and has taught us to expect that he will do so to the end of time^s.]

Whereinsoever he fails to requite either good or evil in this life, he will requite it perfectly in the world to come—

[God inflicts some judgments here on account of sin, in

ⁱ 2 Kings xxiv. 2—4.

^k 2 Chron. xxi. 4, 17.

^l 2 Sam. xii. 10—12. and xvi. 21, 22.

^m Numb. xiv. 33, 34.

ⁿ 1 Kings xxi. 19. and xxii. 38.

^o Ps. lxxx. 11, 12.

^p Rom. i. 26—28. ^q 2 Thess. ii. 10—12.

^r Isai. xxxiii. 1.

^s Rev. xviii. 5, 6.

order that it may be seen that he *governs* the world; but he does not do it in all instances, in order that men may know, that he *will judge* the world. It often happens that the wicked prosper, and the righteous are oppressed; and yet God does not remarkably interpose to punish the one, or to reward the other: but in the last day, all will be made right; and every creature in the universe, the good and the evil, the oppressor and the oppressed, will "receive at God's hands a just recompence of reward^t."]

From hence we may LEARN,

1. To investigate the reasons of God's dealings with us—

[Every dispensation of Providence has a voice, to which we should give diligent attention. If we more carefully inquired into the design of God in his various dispensations towards us, we should find them an inexhaustible source of most instructive information. We might read in our afflictions some fault which God designs to correct; some mistake which he intends to rectify; some corruption which he desires to subdue; some grace which he is anxious to confirm; or some temptation, against which he purposes to fortify our minds. As in the instance before us, God brought to the remembrance of Adoni-bezek the sins which he had committed, and which perhaps in the fulness of his prosperity he had overlooked; so he often, by a particular chastisement, shews us the evil of some practice which we had justified, or revives in our minds the recollection of some which we had too slightly condemned. I would say unto you therefore, "Hear the rod, and Him that hath appointed it." If you see not the reason of it, go unto your God, and say, "Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me?" and let no cross be suffered to escape from you, without having first paid to you that tribute of good, which by the order of Providence you are entitled to exact.]

2. To repent of particular sins—

[We cannot be too particular in calling to mind the sins which at any time we may have committed. Though we have not walked in the steps of this wicked tyrant, it is highly probable that we have lived in sinful habits, which custom has rendered familiar to our minds; and that we have in many things offended God, whilst we have not been conscious of committing any offence at all. Possibly Adoni-bezek at first felt a consciousness of doing wrong; but after a season, accounted his rival kings a legitimate prey, whom he might

^t 2 Thess. i. 6—10.

subdue, and torture in any way that he pleased. But at last God made him sensible of the enormity of his conduct. In like manner we may learn hereafter to view many parts of our conduct with far different feelings than we have yet done. God has borne with us indeed; but we must not consider his long-suffering as any proof of his approbation: he is recording every thing in the book of his remembrance, and will call us into judgment for it, whether it be good or evil. Let us then search and try our ways: let us pray that he will not “remember against us the sins and transgressions of our youth:” let us, like Hezekiah, “humble ourselves for the pride” or any other evil passion that has at any time been in “our heart.” In this way we shall avert many evils from ourselves which unlamented sin would bring upon us, and extract the sting from those which God in his providence may allot us.]

3. To abound in every good work—

[“The godly, no less than the sinner, shall be recompensed in the earth^u:” “for godliness is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.” Look into the Scriptures, and you will find that there is nothing that you can do for God or for your fellow-creatures, to which God has not annexed an appropriate reward. “Draw nigh to him, and he will draw nigh to you:” “honour him, and he will honour you:” “serve him, and he will gird himself and serve you.” Visit and relieve your sick neighbour, and “God will be with you in trouble, and make all your bed in sickness^x:” “nor shall even a cup of cold water given to a disciple, in any wise lose its reward.” Would you then have testimonies of God’s approbation here? endeavour to “abound in the work of the Lord:” and expect also, that, in proportion as you improve your talents now, shall be the weight of glory assigned to you in a better world.]

^u Prov. xi. 31. and xiii. 21.

^x Ps. xli. 1, 3.

CCLXII.

THE DANGER OF INDECISION.

Judg. ii. 1—5. *And an Angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I sware unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you. And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars: but ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this? Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they*

shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you. And it came to pass, when the Angel of the Lord spake these words unto all the children of Israel, that the people lifted up their voice, and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim: and they sacrificed there unto the Lord.

WE admire the condescension of Jehovah towards his chosen people, in that he raised up prophets to instruct them, and not unfrequently sent angels also to minister unto them. But the person who is here called "an Angel of the Lord," seems to have been no other than "the Angel of the Covenant," the Lord himself. It is certain that Jehovah did sometimes assume the appearance of an angel; as when he visited Abraham, and informed him of the judgments that were about to be inflicted on Sodom and Gomorrha. And it is clear that the person spoken of in our text was no created angel; for if he had, how could he with any propriety use such language? It was not a creature that brought the Israelites out of Egypt; but Jehovah. It was not a creature that made a covenant with them; but Jehovah. It was not a creature to whom they were accountable for their disobedience, or whose threatened dereliction they had such reason to deplore, but Jehovah: and the circumstance of his being said to come up from Gilgal, which is supposed to militate against this interpretation, rather confirms it: for it was in Gilgal, near to Jericho, that this same divine person had appeared to Joshua, as an armed warrior. That *he* was Jehovah, cannot be doubted; because he suffered Joshua to worship him; and even commanded him to put off his shoe from his foot, because the very ground whereon he stood was, by reason of *his* presence, rendered holy. In his conversation with Joshua he had called himself "the Captain of the Lord's host;" and therefore there was a particular propriety in his appearing now to the people, to inquire, "Why they had not carried his orders into effect? and to threaten that he would fight for them no longer. Besides, at Gilgal the people had revived

the ordinance of circumcision, and had kept a pass-over unto the Lord; in both which ordinances they had consecrated themselves to God afresh, and engaged to serve him, as his redeemed people. In coming therefore as from Gilgal, the Angel reminded them of their solemn engagements, and humbled them the more for their violation of them.

The particular address of the Lord to them, together with the effect it produced upon them, leads us to consider,

I. The danger of indecision—

The command which God had given to the Israelites was plain and express: they were “utterly to destroy the Canaanites, and to make no covenant with them^a :” and on their performance of this condition was suspended the continuance of God’s interposition in their favour. But they were not careful to execute the divine command: and therefore God threatened, that the Canaanites, whom they had presumed to spare, should become a lasting source of pain to them; that they would gradually draw them into sin, and ultimately become instruments of inflicting on them the vengeance they had merited.

Such is the sin which God’s professing people still commit—

[The command to every one of us is to make no league with any one of our spiritual enemies; not with the *world*: on the contrary, we are to “overcome it;” to “come out from the people of it, and be separate;” to be “dead to” all its cares and pleasures, “being crucified to it, and esteeming it as crucified unto us:” we are “not to be of it, any more than Jesus Christ himself was of it.” With respect to *the flesh* also and our corrupt nature, no truce must be made with it, even for a moment: we must “mortify our members upon earth,” and “crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts:” we must not spare one evil desire, though it should be dear as “a right eye,” or useful as “a right hand;” we must “pluck it out with abhorrence, or cut it off, and cast it from us.” It is not sufficient to make them pay tribute: we must slay them; we must “shew them no mercy^b ;” our hatred of them must be irreconcilable and incessant.

^a Deut. vii. 2.

^b Deut. vii. 2.

But what is our state? Do we find in ourselves this zeal? Instead of proceeding to the utter extirpation of our spiritual enemies, are we not satisfied if they do not reign? Are we not contented to let them exist, provided they keep themselves concealed from public view? — — — What then is the declaration of God unto us? Does he not warn us, that the evils which we spare shall become “as thorns in our sides, and prove a snare unto our souls?” And do we not find that it is even so in our daily experience? Let *the person who still associates with the men of this world*, say, whether he does not find that they are a clog to him in his spiritual course? whether his endeavours to please them do not lead him sometimes into sinful compliances, and his fear of displeasing them do not keep him from testifying against their evil ways? Will any say that he has found it practicable for “light to have communion with darkness, or Christ with Belial;” or that the soul can flourish whilst it is engaged in such a foolish attempt as that of reconciling the services of God and Mammon? Let *the person who is still too deeply immersed in the cares or pleasures of the world*, say, whether he has not often been led to strain his conscience in order to prosecute his ends, and to adopt some practices which in his heart he disapproved? — — — Let *the person who harbours some besetting sin*, ask, whether it has not often risen up with a force that was almost irresistible, and nearly, if not altogether, involved him in some flagrant transgression? Let the person in whom pride, or lewdness, or covetousness, or passion is suffered to dwell, answer this question — — — He knows but little of his own heart, who does not know, that sin is a flame, which, if not extinguished, may speedily “set on fire his whole nature^c,” and “burn to the lowest hell.” Lastly, Let *the person who listens to the temptations of Satan*, say, whether there be any way of making him flee, but by perpetual resistance^d? — — —]

If such then be the danger of indecision, let us consider,

II. The duty of those who are convicted of it—

Two things were produced by the declarations of the Angel in the breasts of all the congregation of Israel; which also our own experience calls for; namely,

1. An humiliation of soul before God—

[The people “lifted up their voice and wept.” And who amongst us has not abundant reason to follow their example?

^c Jam. iii. 6. with Deut. xxxii. 22.

^d Jam. iv. 7.

Whether we consider our *sin* or our *punishment*, we have but too much reason to weep. Indecision is not so light a sin as some imagine^e: it shews an insincerity of heart, which is most odious in itself, and most offensive to God. See in what a light the Israelites beheld it, when once a conviction of it was brought home to their minds! and is not the sparing of inveterate lusts as wicked as sparing the devoted Canaanites? Does it not betray an equal want of reverence for God, of love to his name, and of zeal for his honour? Behold then what is the duty of every one amongst us: “Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into heaviness; humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, and he shall lift you up^f.” Nor does the threatened punishment afford us less occasion to weep: for a subjection to sin is the greatest evil that can befall us. If God should once say, “He is joined to idols; let him alone;” it would be a heavier judgment to us than immediate death and immediate damnation; because we should live only to “treasure up wrath against the day of wrath,” and should perish at last under an accumulated weight of misery to all eternity. O that the dread of such a punishment might humble us all in dust and ashes!]

2. An application to God through the medium of sacrifice—

[“They sacrificed there unto the Lord;” and had recourse to the blood of sprinkling for the remission of their sin. Though their weeping was very general, and very bitter, inso-much that the name of the place, which was *Shiloh*, was called *Bochim*, or *Weepers*, from that circumstance, yet did they not hope to pacify their offended God with tears: they knew that an atonement was necessary; and they sought him therefore in his appointed way. O that *we* might learn from them! Humiliation is *necessary*; but it is not *sufficient*: tears, even if we could shed rivers of them, could never wash away sin: the blood of atonement is necessary; “without shedding of blood there is no remission.” We must apply to the Lord Jesus Christ, and “go to God through him.” We must acknowledge our obligation to his sacrifice for all the mercy and forbearance we have already experienced; and must look to it as the only means of our reconciliation with God: it is his blood, and “his blood alone, that can ever cleanse us from our sin” — — — And here I would particularly remind you that the sin laid to the charge of Israel, was not of *commission*, but of *omission*; not some flagrant enormity, but a lukewarmness and neglect of duty: yet did they see the need of a sacrifice to atone for *that*. In like manner, though we should have

^e Job xxxi. 25, 28.

^f Jam. iv. 9, 10.

no guilt imputed to us but that of omission and defect, yet must we apply to the blood of sprinkling, and seek for pardon through that one Sacrifice which was once offered for us on the cross.]

LEARN then from hence,

1. The value of a faithful monitor—

[We do not like faithful admonitions, even from those whose special duty it is to reprove sin. We are ready to account them harsh and severe. But what is the office which a friendly monitor performs? Is it not that which the Angel of the Covenant himself executed, yea, and came from heaven on purpose to perform? But it may be said, that we alarm men, and make them melancholy: true; we shew them their guilt and danger, and try to bring them to a state of humiliation on account of it, and to an affiance in the Lord Jesus Christ for the pardon of it. But is this an evil? If the whole congregation were affected precisely as the whole congregation of Israel were, every one *weeping* for his sins, and seeking the remission of them through the great Sacrifice, would it be a matter for regret? No: we would to God that this very place might this day deserve the name of *Bochim*; and that the remembrance of it might never be obliterated from your minds! Sure we are that the congregation of Israel felt themselves deeply indebted to Him who thus sought their welfare; and we have no doubt but that, however an ungodly world may hate our reproofs, there is not a contrite sinner in the universe who will not regard his monitor as a father, and “receive him as an Angel of God, even as Christ Jesus^ε.” They will not hesitate to thank him, who, by bringing them to weep *here*, has kept them from weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth in hell *for ever*.]

2. The danger of forgetting the admonitions that have been given us—

[During the days of Joshua and the elders that outlived Joshua, the Israelites maintained some measure of steadfastness in their duty to God: but afterwards they fearfully declined, and brought upon themselves the most afflictive judgments. The whole remainder of the chapter from whence our text is taken, elucidates this truth. The impressions which were now made upon them gradually wore away; and the people relapsed into their former state of supineness. Of the unreasonableness of their conduct they were fully convinced: for, when the Angel asked them, “Why have ye done this?” they could not offer one word in extenuation of their guilt: but when they

^ε Gal. iv. 14.

ceased to listen to the voice of conscience, they proceeded from one wickedness to another, "till there was no remedy^h." And how often is this seen amongst ourselves! Many are deeply affected on some particular occasion: they will weep, and pray, and think of the Saviour; but in process of time they lose all their good impressions, and "go back with the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to the wallowing in the mire." The Lord grant that it may not prove thus with *us*! May our "goodness not be as the dew, or as the morning cloud that passeth away;" but rather as the sun, which shines brighter and brighter unto the perfect day.]

^h 2 Chron. xxxvi. 15—17.

CCLXIII.

EHUD AND EGLON.

Judg. iii. 20. *And Ehud said, I have a message from God unto thee. And he arose out of his seat.*

GOD frequently is pleased to make use of his enemies for the correction of his own people: but when he has accomplished by them the purposes of his grace, he then calls them also into judgment for the acts which they have performed. In executing his will they have no respect to him, but follow only the wicked inclinations of their own hearts; and therefore he recompenses them, not as obedient servants, but according to the real quality of their actions. Thus he dealt with Sennacherib, who was only gratifying his own ambition, whilst, as a sword in Jehovah's hand, he was inflicting punishment on Israel: and thus he dealt with Eglon also, whom he had raised up to power for the purpose of chastising his offending people. Yet there is something very remarkable in the way in which God requited the wickedness of Eglon, and in which he delivered his people out of his hand. The man whom God raised up as his instrument, was Ehud; who, by a stratagem, effected the death of Eglon.

We will briefly set before you,

I. The conduct of Ehud—

Eglon, king of Moab, having subdued Israel, himself resided in Canaan, in the city of Palm-trees: and Ehud was sent, as the representative of Israel, to offer to him their accustomed tribute. But Ehud, hoping for an opportunity to assassinate Eglon, took a dagger with him: and, after having presented the tribute and left the city with his attendants, went back alone to Eglon, pretending to have a secret errand to him. Eglon ordered all other persons to depart from his presence, and thus gave Ehud a good opportunity of accomplishing his design. Ehud availed himself of it with great success: being left-handed, he drew forth the dagger without any suspicion, and plunged it, even the haft together with the blade, into the belly of Eglon, who instantly fell down dead. Ehud then retired from the secret chamber where the transaction had taken place, and locked the doors after him, and went composedly away, as though nothing particular had happened; and thus effected his escape; and instantly stirred up Israel to cast off the yoke of Moab, before their enemies should have had time to concert their measures under another head.

Now to form a correct estimate of this action, we must consider it in two different points of view;

1. As voluntarily undertaken—

[In this view it was altogether indefensible. Treachery and murder can never be justified. Though Eglon was an usurper and a cruel oppressor, still the Israelites professed subjection to him; and Ehud went as their messenger, to present to Eglon their acknowledgments of that subjection. If he had chosen to cast off the yoke of Moab, he was at liberty to do so in a way of open warfare: but to become an assassin he had no right: nor could the end which he proposed, sanctify the means he used: the means were wrong; and he had “no right to do evil that good might come.”]

2. As divinely commissioned—

[No created power could have authorized Abraham to slay his son, or Israel to plunder Egypt, and extirpate the inhabitants of Canaan: nor could any human being have executed such things of his own mind, without contracting very heinous guilt. But God is not bound by the rules which he has

imposed on us: he may act towards his creatures as he sees best, and may employ instruments in any way that he pleases: nor would even an angel contract defilement in executing any commission that God had given him. An angel slew in one night all the first-born in the land of Egypt; and on another occasion, a hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrians: yet no one thinks of imputing guilt to him on that account:—so Ehud, if appointed to the work by God, might innocently effect it in the way he did. Jehu was commissioned by God to dethrone Ahab, and destroy his family: and, though he was punished afterwards because he was not actuated by a becoming zeal for the glory of God, yet for the action itself he was rewarded even to the fourth generation. Precisely thus may Ehud at this moment be receiving a reward from God for that act of his, which, under other circumstances, would have been highly sinful. And there is reason to believe that he was directed by God in that action; since not only were his wisdom, courage, and success, beyond all that could have been expected in a merely human enterprise, but we are expressly told that “God raised up this man to be the deliverer of his people^a.”

We must not however imagine, that his conduct is to be followed as a precedent: for no man can dare to follow it, unless he have infallible evidence that he is called of God to do so: but, as no man can expect such a call at this time, no man can without the deepest criminality presume to imitate his example.]

Having thrown what light we can on the dubious conduct of Ehud, we proceed to suggest,—

II. Some reflections arising from it—

Supposing Ehud to have been divinely commissioned, he might well say to Eglon, “I have a message from God to thee.” At all events his language leads us to observe,

1. That God does send messages to mortal men—

[The whole creation is delivering to us, as it were, a message from God, and conveying to us the knowledge of his perfections^b — — — Every providential dispensation also has some important lesson to communicate: the mercies of God declare his goodness to us, and invite us to repentance^c, and his judgments are intended to discover to us some truths which we did not previously discern: “Hear ye the rod,” saith the prophet, “and Him that hath appointed it^d.” But it is in his word more especially that God comes down to commune

^a ver. 15.

^b Rom. i. 20. Ps. xix. 1—4.

^c Rom. ii. 4.

^d Mic. vi. 9.

with sinful man. His Gospel is so called from the very circumstance of its being a message of mercy, or, as the word means, good tidings from God to man : and ministers are ambassadors from him, sent to beseech you in his name to accept reconciliation with him through the death of his Son. Indeed this message contains the substance of all that we have to speak to you in God's name ; and from hence it is called by God himself, "the ministry of reconciliation." Behold then this day we come unto you and say, "We have a message from God to you!" He sends us this day to invite you to come to him for all the blessings of salvation, and to receive them freely at his hands, "without money, and without price^e." — — —]

2. That, by whomsoever his messages are delivered, we should attend to them with the profoundest reverence—

[Though Eglon was a king, and Ehud an oppressed servant, yea, though Eglon was a heathen that did not worship the true God, yet, the very instant that Ehud announced that he had a message from God unto him, he rose up from his seat, that he might receive it with the greater reverence. And does not this idolatrous heathen reproach us, who, when God's servants are delivering messages to us in his name, scarcely pay any attention to them, or perhaps fall asleep in the midst of them? Behold, how Israel listened to the reading of God's word in the days of Nehemiah^f — — — that is the way in which we should read or hear the word of God at this time. We should not come to the house of God as critics, to sit in judgment; or as curious persons, to be entertained; but as sinners, to "hear what the Lord God will say concerning us." Beautiful is the example of Cornelius and his family^g: they did not regard Peter as a man, but as a messenger from God: and in like manner should we also "receive the word, not as the word of man, but, as it is in truth, the word of God^h." O that the spirit of Samuel were more visible in usⁱ, and that we sought instruction from the word, only in order to obey it^k!"]

3. That we should ever be prepared for whatsoever message he may send—

[Who can tell but that as his message to Eglon was a message of death, so he may send to us this day, saying, "Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die and not live." He needs not the aid of an assassin to take away our lives: there are millions of ways in which death may seize upon us. As

^e Isai. lv. 1—3.

^f Neh. viii. 3, 5, 6.

^g Acts x. 33.

^h 1 Thess. ii. 13.

ⁱ 1 Sam. iii. 10.

^k John ix. 36.

for our security, the more secure we are in our own apprehension, the more likely are we to receive such a message from God¹. It was when the rich fool was looking forward to years of enjoyment, that God said to him, "This night thy soul shall be required of thee:" and it was when Job fondly expected he should "die in his nest^m," that God pulled down his nest, and despoiled him of all that he had. Let us not then promise ourselves an hour's continuance even of life itselfⁿ: but be standing "with our loins girt, and our lamps trimmed, that at whatever hour our Lord may come, he may find us watching"———]

APPLICATION — — — °

¹ 1 Thess. v. 3. ^m Job xxix. 18. See also Ps. xxx. 6, 7.

ⁿ Prov. xxvii. 1.

° This may be more appropriate or more general: in the former case, a message may be delivered as from God himself to *Oppressors*, and the *Oppressed*; (to awe the one, as Isai. x. 5—18. and encourage the other, as Isai. x. 24—27.) in the latter case, an Address may be made to the *Careless*, the *Backsliding*, and the *Faithful*, with the prefatory Remark to each, "I have a message from God to thee."

CCLXIV.

JAEL AND SISERA.

Judg. v. 24—27. *Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent. He asked water, and she gave him milk; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish. She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workman's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote off his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples. At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead.*

THE subject of assassination, one would suppose, should not admit of much diversity of sentiment: but there are those even in the Christian world, who think that in extreme cases, where the death of a tyrant would put an end to grievous oppressions and desolating wars, the dagger of an assassin might be employed. I am not aware that any would attempt to vindicate this sentiment by an appeal to Scripture: they would justify it rather on reasonings from expediency: but it is certain that, though in most cases

where such actions are recorded they are mentioned with abhorrence, there are some instances wherein they are mentioned with approbation and applause. Such was the case of Ehud, who stabbed Eglon king of Moab: and such was the case before us, where Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, destroyed Sisera, whom she had received under her protection, and to whom she had administered every friendly aid.

The account which is given us of this transaction must be considered in a two-fold view;

I. As an historic fact—

The fact itself is set forth in the foregoing chapter—

[Jabin, king of Canaan, had mightily oppressed the children of Israel for twenty years. At last they cried unto God; who directed Deborah, a prophetess, to take immediate measures for their deliverance. She commissioned Barak to raise ten thousand men; and promised, in God's name, that Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, should be drawn to him and delivered into his hands. The event corresponded with the prediction: Sisera was defeated; and he fled away on foot, and sought refuge in the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, with whom he was at peace. Jael received him most kindly, supplied him with necessary refreshment, covered him with a mantle, and gave him every reason to expect safety under her protection. But, when he was asleep, she took a hammer, and drove a long nail through his temples and through his head: and then went out to the door of her tent, and brought in Barak to see his enemy dead upon the floor.]

And what are we to think of this fact?—

[Supposing it to be unauthorized by any commission from heaven, we cannot hesitate to pronounce it one of the vilest crimes that ever was perpetrated. Some have endeavoured to extenuate it, by saying, that she did not *promise* not to betray him. But this is a mere subterfuge: whether she *promised* or not, *in words*, her whole conduct was equivalent to the strongest promise: and she was guilty of the basest treachery that we can find on record in the annals of the world. She murdered a man who was at peace with her, and whom she had undertaken to protect.

Thus strongly have we spoken on the occasion, in order that our subsequent views may not be misinterpreted.

Here a question naturally arises; If the action was so base, how comes it to be so highly commended? how comes a prophetess to pronounce such an eulogy upon her, as to call her

“the most blessed of women,” for doing that which was in itself such a flagrant act of injustice and cruelty? I answer, (as we before answered in the case of Ehud,) that God is not bound by the laws which he has given to us; and that he may dispense with those obligations which men owe to each other, in order to advance his own purposes in the way he sees fit. He may, as we before observed, order Abraham to slay his son: and therefore he might equally order Jael to slay Sisera; and might make known his mind with equal certainty to her as to him. And, that he did give her this commission, we can have no doubt: for, on account of Barak’s unbelief, Deborah told him that *he* should lose part of the honour which he might have acquired; and that “God would sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Moreover, this whole chapter is a tribute of praise to God on account of the transaction, wherein Jael in particular is celebrated as having performed a most acceptable service to the Lord.

Our proud hearts are apt to rise up in rebellion against God on this occasion; and to ask, how such an order could consist with his perfections? But let us be careful how we presume “to reprove God^a.” We forget that he is the Creator of all, and “may do what he will with his own^b,” and that “he giveth not account of any of his matters^c.” Let us remember too, that we are no more than mere worms, which, *as creatures*, have no claim to existence for one moment; and, *as sinners*, deserve to be in hell: and that, consequently, it is not possible for God to do us any injustice. If, however, we still be disposed to quarrel with this dispensation, the answer of St. Paul to such objectors must be resorted to; “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?” Consider the objections to which that reply was made; and it will be found abundantly sufficient for every other objection that can be raised^d — — —]

Let us next consider this account,

II. As an emblematic record—

The words which close this divine hymn, clearly shew that we are to consider the history in this view^e. The transaction was an emblematic representation,

1. Of the judgments that await God’s enemies—

[Sisera’s army was, humanly speaking, invincible, especially by such an handful of men as Barak could muster, and

^a Job xl. 2.

^b Matt. xx. 15.

^c Job xxxiii. 13.

^d Rom. ix. 16—24.

^e Compare ver. 31. with Ps. lxxxiii. 2, 3, 4, 9, 10.

even the greater part of them unarmed, except with such weapons as they might hastily collect^f. Indeed his mother and friends had not the least doubt of a successful issue to the conflict. But when his time was come, he and his army were wholly destroyed: and the very steps which he took for the destruction of God's people, God himself overruled to effect his overthrow^g. Thus it shall be with all the oppressors and persecutors of God's Church and people: how potent soever they may be, and however secure they may think themselves, "their judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not^h." They exult in the thought of what they will effect: but God "laugheth them to scorn, for he seeth that their day is comingⁱ." The very plans which they concert for the destruction of the Church, God will often overrule for their own destruction^k: or, if no particular judgment come upon them in this world, the time is quickly coming, when they would be glad to have "the rocks and mountains fall upon them, to cover them from the wrath" of an avenging God. They think themselves strong now: but "will they be strong in the day that HE shall deal with them, and will they thunder with a voice like his?" O that they were wise and would consider this, ere they "be suddenly destroyed and without a remedy!"^j

2. Of the triumphs that are prepared for the Lord's people—

[The Church at large, or individuals in it, may be reduced, like Israel of old, to great distress; but they shall surely triumph at last. However weak you may be in yourselves, you have no cause to fear; for God is on your side; and will suffer neither sin nor Satan to have dominion over you^l. You need not direction or assistance from man; you need not say to any human being, "If thou wilt go with me, I will go; but if thou wilt not go with me, I will not go^m:" for God is with you; and "through him you shall be more than conquerors." His voice to every one of you is, like that of Deborah to Barak, "Up, for this is the day that the Lord hath delivered thine enemies into thine hand: is not the Lord gone out before theeⁿ?" The very "stars in their courses shall fight for you^o," rather than that you shall be subdued. This is the testimony of all the prophets; nor shall any one that trusts in it be disappointed of his hope. See how the sun bursts through the clouds that obscured it in the early

^f Judg. iv. 13. with v. 8.

^g Judg. iv. 6, 7.

^h 2 Pet. ii. 3.

ⁱ Compare Ps. ii. 3, 4. with xxxvii. 12, 13.

^k Mic. iv. 11, 12.

^l Rom. vi. 14. and xvi. 20.

^m Judg. iv. 8.

ⁿ Judg. iv. 14.

^o ver. 20.

morn, and shines forth in its might: so shall you rise above all your enemies, and shine forth in everlasting glory^p.]

The subject ADDRESSES itself particularly,

1. To those who are in affliction—

[What was the remedy to which Israel had recourse, when their affliction pressed sore upon them? It was prayer: “they cried unto the Lord.” And is not the same remedy open to us? is it not also as effectual as ever? Is the Lord’s hand shortened that it cannot save, or his ear heavy that it cannot hear? He has given the direction, “Call upon me in the time of trouble, and I will hear thee, and thou shalt glorify me:” “nor will he ever suffer any to seek his face in vain”———]

2. To those who have been delivered from it—

[Delay not to render thanks to your Almighty Deliverer. Whatever means he may have used, remember that HE is the first great Cause, “the Author and Giver of every good and perfect gift.” Stir up yourselves then to glorify him, like Deborah of old; “Awake, awake, Deborah; awake, awake; utter a song.” Call to mind also the various circumstances both of your affliction and deliverance; that nothing may be omitted which may enhance the mercy in your eyes, or give glory to your heavenly Benefactor. This is a matter of great importance: if you rest in general acknowledgments, you will feel but weak emotions of gratitude: but if you search out occasions of praise, you will soon be filled with wonder and amazement at the mercies vouchsafed unto you.]

P ver. 31.

CCLXV.

THE PRAYER OF DEBORAH.

Judg. v. 31. *So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord: but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.*

OF the victories gained by God’s ancient people, many are so incredible, that we could never believe the histories that record them, if we did not know those histories to have been written by holy men, under the direction and inspiration of the Holy Ghost. The destruction of a mighty army by means of trumpets, and lamps in broken pitchers, seems altogether

fabulous: yet was this effected by Gideon, in conformity with the direction given him, and in dependence upon God. The overthrow of Jabin the king of Canaan, by ten thousand men under the command of a woman, was scarcely less miraculous, especially if we consider to what a low state the whole kingdom of Israel was reduced, and how exceeding powerful was the army of their oppressors: yet was Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, routed by this little band, and not so much as a single individual of that mighty host survived the contest^a. The hymn of thanksgiving, wherein Deborah celebrated this wonderful event, is recorded in the chapter before us; and she closes it with a prayer,

I. For the destruction of all God's enemies—

Imprecations, when personal and vindictive, are contrary to the mind of God: but when uttered as denunciations of God's determined purpose, they are not unsuited to the most holy character. Even St. Paul said, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema maran-atha^b." Thus, in imprecating destruction on God's enemies, Deborah must be understood to express,

1. Her approbation of it as just—

[Who does not see, that those who rise in rebellion against their God, deserve punishment? — — — There is not a creature suffering under the displeasure of the Most High, who must not say, "True and righteous are thy judgments, Lord God Almighty^c."]

2. Her desire of it as good—

[The Law of God, which denounces a curse against every transgression, is declared to be "holy and just and good^d." In like manner, all considerate men are agreed in acknowledging it a blessing to live under laws wisely enacted and faithfully administered. What though the execution of the laws prove fatal to some? it is a benefit to the community, who are thereby enabled to live in peaceful security. So the execution of God's laws proves doubtless terrible to those who are called to sustain his vengeance; yet to the whole universe is it the

^a Judg. iv. 16.

^b 1 Cor. xvi. 22.

^c Rev. xv. 3.

^d Rom. vii. 12.

means of displaying the justice and holiness of the Deity, which, if sin were unpunished, would be altogether compromised and eclipsed.]

3. Her expectation of it as certain—

[In fact, her imprecation has the force of a prediction; a prediction which shall assuredly be accomplished in its season. Of Sisera's army not one survived: and of those who die in their sins, there shall not one be found at the right hand of God in the day of judgment. "Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished."]

To this she adds a prayer,

II. For the advancement of all his loving and obedient people—

Well is the distinction drawn between the enemies and the friends of God. The latter are described as "those who love him^e." If, between *men*, we could admit a medium between love and hatred, we can by no means admit of it between God and his creatures. Indifference towards God would be constructive enmity. Those only who love him can be numbered amongst his friends. In behalf of these, therefore, she prays, that they may "be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might." Under this beautiful image she prays,

1. That they may shine with ever-increasing splendour—

[The sun in its early dawn casts but feeble light upon the world; but soon proceeds to irradiate the whole horizon, and to burst with splendour upon those who but a little before were immersed in darkness. Thus, the goings-forth of those who seek the Lord diffuse at first but an indistinct and doubtful gleam^f: but, through the tender mercy of God, they advance; and "their light shines brighter and brighter to the perfect day^g." How desirable is this to be realized in *us*! Let us so walk, my Brethren, that "our profiting may appear unto all."]

2. That they may diffuse benefits whithersoever they come—

[The sun is the fountain of light and life to the whole world. Look at the places where, for months together, the sun never bends its course: the whole face of nature wears

^e Eph. vi. 24.

^f Hos. vi. 3.

^g Prov. iv. 18.

the appearance of death: and nothing but the return of his kindlier influences restores her to life. Thus in countries where the friends of God are not found, the whole population are in a state of spiritual and moral death: but "in their light is light seen^h," and from them is spread abroad a vital influence, to animate and fructify the sons of men. View the path of the Apostle Paul "from Judea round about unto Illyricum:" in all his way he was the instrument of "turning men from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto Godⁱ." Such should we also be, my Brethren, according to the ability which God has given us, and the opportunities he affords us: we should "shine as lights in a dark world, holding forth to all the word of life^k," for the illumination and salvation of all around us.]

3. That they may reflect honour upon God in the eyes of all who behold them—

[Who ever contemplated the sun shining in his strength, and did not admire the wisdom and goodness and power of Him who created it? "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handy-work; nor is there any speech or language where *their* voice is not heard^l." Such should be the effect of the light diffused by the saints of God: it should constrain all to confess that "we are God's workmanship^m," and "so to shine before men, that they may be compelled to glorify our Father which is in heavenⁿ."]]

ADDRESS—

[Inquire, Brethren, to which of these classes you belong: for, however they may be confounded now, there will be an awful difference between them ere long; the one "awaking to everlasting shame and contempt^o," and the other "shining forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father^p." On the one shall the justice of God be magnified; but in the other shall his love and mercy be glorified, to all eternity^q.]

^h Ps. xxxvi. 9.

ⁱ Acts xxvi. 18.

^k Phil. ii. 15, 16.

^l Ps. xix. 1—3.

^m Eph. ii. 10.

ⁿ Matt. v. 16.

^o Dan. xii. 2, 3.

^p Matt. xiii. 41—43.

^q 2 Thess. i. 6—10.

CCLXVI.

GIDEON'S FLEECE.

Judg. vi. 36—40. *And Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I*

know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said. And it was so : for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water. And Gideon said unto God, Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once : let me prove, I pray thee, but this once with the fleece ; let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. And God did so that night : for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.

IT is a comfort to know, that, however afflicted and apparently desperate our state may be in this world, there is no just ground for despondency. God can never want instruments for effecting our deliverance ; or fail in effecting it, however weak and inadequate those instruments may be.

We can scarcely conceive a more hopeless condition than that to which the nation of Israel was reduced at this time by “the Midianites and Amalekites and the children of the east.” These enemies “came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude ; for both they and their cattle were without number ; and annually, for seven years, they entered into the land to destroy it ; whilst the children of Israel hid themselves in dens and caves and strong-holds in the mountains, destitute of any sustenance^a,” and incapable of resisting their invaders.

But, in this extremity, God was pleased to visit them in mercy, and to raise up for them a deliverer, “even Gideon, whilst he was threshing out some wheat, to hide it from the Midianites^b.” To satisfy the mind of Gideon, who pleaded his utter incapacity for the office devolved upon him, God gave him a sign : he accepted an offering of a kid, prepared as for food with unleavened cakes, and caused “fire to rise up out of the rock, on which the flesh and cakes were placed, to consume them : and then departed out of his sight^c.” But still, though further

^a ver. 2—6.

^b ver. 11, 12.

^c ver. 17—21. It is clear that “the Angel” was no other than Jehovah himself. See ver. 14. and ver. 22—24.

encouraged by the success of his endeavour to destroy idolatry in his father's house^d, and by the willingness which several of the tribes manifested to enlist under his banners, he yet needed to have his faith strengthened; and for that end, he desired a further sign from the Lord, that so he might be assured that the promise made to him should be fulfilled.

In this circumstance we see displayed before our eyes,

I. The weakness of man—

Gideon could not give full credit to the word of God—

[It had been declared to him by the Lord, "Thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?" On his expressing a doubt how this could possibly be effected by so weak an instrument as he, God had confirmed his word, as with an oath, "Surely I will be with thee; and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man^f." To remove all doubt from his mind, a sign had been given him, similar to that which had been given at the consecration of Aaron to the priestly office^g. Yet still he wanted fresh signs, to convince him that God would indeed fulfil his word; and even prescribed to God the signs that should be given, desiring that a fleece might be wet with dew, whilst all was dry around; and again, that the fleece might be dry, whilst on all around it the dew should rest.]

Do we not see in this the weakness of all mankind?

[Abraham repeatedly resorted to a base subterfuge in denying his wife, because he could not trust in God for his protection from Pharaoh^h, and Abimelechⁱ. Sarah, too, though commended for her faith, could not believe that, at her advanced period of life, she should bear to Abraham a son^k. When Moses was commissioned to bring Israel out of Egypt, no less than three successive signs were given to him, for the conviction of his own mind, and of the minds of those to whom he was sent: his rod was turned into a serpent, and restored from a living serpent to a rod again; his hand was rendered both leprous, and whole again; and the water which he poured out was converted into blood^l. David also, under circumstances of great trial, found doubts arise in his mind; but

^d ver. 25—32.

^e ver. 14.

^f ver. 15, 16.

^g Lev. ix. 24.

^h Gen. xii. 12, 13.

ⁱ Gen. xx. 13.

^k Gen. xviii. 11, 12.

^l Exod. iv. 1—9.

confessed, upon reflection, “This is mine infirmity^m.” And who amongst us has not, on many occasions, “staggered at the promises through unbelief?” The disciples themselves, when a storm arose, were fearful that they should perish, notwithstanding their Lord and Master was embarked with them in the vesselⁿ: and the intrepid Peter’s heart began to fail him, when walking on the sea, because the wind became more boisterous than when he first descended from the ship^o. So, in seasons of trial, we have found it exceeding difficult to place such confidence in God, as to dismiss all fear, and commit our cause to him without any anxiety about the issue of it. We can know but little of the workings of our own hearts, if we have not discovered, that “there is in us an evil heart of unbelief,” and that to place perfect confidence in God is the highest of all attainments. To say under such accumulated trials as Job sustained, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him^p,” is little short of absolute perfection.]

But this weakness of Gideon was the means of displaying,

II. The condescension of God—

God, instead of being offended with his servant, acceded to his request—

[A fellow-creature, who had given such solemn promises, would have been quite indignant at finding his veracity called in question. How offensive was the request, “If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, and *do as thou hast said*, behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, *then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said.*” Nor did even this suffice: no: he must “prove” God a second time by reversing this request, before he can believe “*that God will do as he has said.*” Yet, astonishing to behold! God, instead of being offended with him, gives him the satisfaction he desires, and accommodates himself to the wishes of his yet doubting servant.

A similar instance of condescension we behold in Jesus towards his unbelieving disciple. All the disciples had seen our Lord, except Thomas; and all bare the most decided testimony to his resurrection. But Thomas would not believe: no: the testimony of all his brethren was of no avail: he would not even believe his own eyes, if he should see his Lord: he would not believe, unless he should put his fingers into the print of the nails made in the hands and feet of his

^m Ps. lxxvii. 7—10.

ⁿ Mark iv. 38.

^o Matt. xiv. 28—31.

^p Job xiii. 15.

Lord, and thrust his hand into the side that had been pierced by the spear. How justly might he have been left to the perverseness of his own mind, and to all the bitter consequences of his unbelief! But no: the Saviour appears to him also, and gives him the very evidence he desired.]

And the same condescension may we also expect—

[It is true, *we* are not authorized to specify the terms on which we will credit the divine testimony, or to expect any *visible* signs in confirmation of God's word: yet are we not a whit less assured of his condescension and grace, than Gideon and Thomas were. We shall find, in his very covenant which he has made with us, the very same condescension to our weakness, and the very same desire to satisfy our minds: for "he has confirmed his covenant with an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have the stronger consolation^a." And, if we look at the promises, we shall find that they are made in a way purposely to counteract and sustain the weakness of our minds. Mark *the repetitions*: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness^r." "Fear not, thou worm Jacob: thou shalt thresh the mountains^s." Mark his answers to the objections arising in our minds: "Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered? Yes; thus saith the Lord: The captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children^t." We see, then, that at this day God is the same as in the days of old; and that still, as formerly, "he will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax, till he bring forth judgment unto victory^u."]

In all this, however, we discern,

III. The efficacy of prayer—

It was prayer that prevailed in the instance before us—

[Gideon, with much humility and tenderness of spirit, besought the Lord; even as the Prophet Isaiah afterwards did in behalf of Hezekiah. God promised to Hezekiah that his disorder should be healed, and that he should "on the third day go up to the house of the Lord." A sign was then offered to him, and a choice was given him in relation to it: and he, thinking it a much harder thing for the shadow on

^a Heb. vi. 17, 18.

^r Isai. xli. 10.

^s Isai. xli. 14—16.

^t Isai. xlix. 24, 25.

^u Matt. xii. 20.

the sun-dial to go back, than to advance, ten degrees, fixed upon that which he conceived to be the more difficult: and "the Prophet Isaiah," who in God's name had offered him the sign, "*cried unto the Lord*; and he brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz^x."

To us, also, will God vouchsafe his mercies, in answer to our prayers—

[We are told that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." And in this respect Elijah is held forth to us as an example: for he, "though a man subject to like passions as we are, prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain; and the earth brought forth her fruit^y." Thus also shall it be with us, under circumstances of peculiar trial. I mean not to say, that we shall have any miraculous answers to our prayers; for the age of miracles is past: but I must say, that, even in relation to temporal matters, our prayers shall not go forth in vain; and, in reference to spiritual mercies, they shall descend almost in visible answers on our souls. Let us suppose the whole neighbourhood where we dwell, to be in a state of barrenness, so far as it respects the blessings of salvation: if a man cry earnestly to God, the dew of his blessing shall descend upon him in the richest abundance; (a whole bowl-full shall, if I may so speak, be wrung out from his contracted fleece:) on the other hand, if God's judgments are poured forth on all around him, a merciful exemption shall be given to him; even as it is said, "A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee^z." No man can conceive to what an extent God will magnify his condescension and grace towards an humble suppliant, till he has himself besought the Lord, and obtained an answer of peace unto his soul. "We may ask what we will, and it shall be done unto us."]

What now shall I further say to you? This only would I ADD—

Let your faith in God's blessed word be firm and uniform—

[Think not of difficulties: "There is nothing too hard for the Lord." Were your enemies as numerous as the Midianites, and you had nothing wherewith to combat them but a pitcher and a lamp, they should all fall before you. Only be strong in faith: and you shall find, that "all things are possible to him that believeth."]

^x 2 Kings xx. 8—11.

^y Jam. v. 16—18.

^z Ps. xci. 7.

CCLXVII.

GIDEON'S VICTORY OVER MIDIAN.

Judg. vii. 19—22. *So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon. And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried, and fled. And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host.*

WE are so familiar with scripture history, that we cease to be struck with the most astonishing events. Great events in profane history are handed down from generation to generation, and are made subjects of universal admiration: but those which are related in the Bible are passed over with little notice. How can we account for this? Is it that, in the one, the feats of *men* are seen, and in the other the feats of *God*? and that we are gratified with contemplating whatever advances the glory of *man*, but have no disposition to magnify and adore our *God*? We fear that this is the true solution of the difficulty. But, if we feel not as we ought, we cannot be insensible to the display of God's power and goodness in the passage we have now read. Indeed the whole history of Gideon is so curious and instructive, that, instead of confining ourselves to the particular action specified in the text, it will be desirable,

I. *To notice the circumstances which led to this victory—*

Here we must *notice*,

1. His call to his work—

[He was by nature qualified for the office of a deliverer, being “a mighty man of valour.” Yet that circumstance would not have justified so hopeless an attempt as that which he engaged in, if he had not been called to it by God himself. But God (under the appearance of an angel) called him to it,

and assured him of his presence in the undertaking, and of ultimate success in it: "*Thou* shalt save Israel out of the hands of the Midianites: have not I sent thee? Surely I will be with thee; and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man^a."

In confirmation of his call, God accepted his offering, which he caused to be miraculously consumed by fire out of the rock; and thereby gave him an undoubted evidence that he was that same Almighty Being, who had formerly commissioned Moses to deliver Israel from their Egyptian bondage^b.]

2. His preparation for it—

[The work to which he was called was exceeding arduous; and it was desirable that before he undertook it, he should have an opportunity of proving his zeal for God, and of seeing the sufficiency of God to carry him through it. God therefore ordered him to begin the work of reformation in his father's house; to cast down the altar of Baal, and cut down the grove where that idol was worshipped, and build an altar to Jehovah, and offer a bullock for a sacrifice upon it. This was impracticable by day, because the worshippers of Baal would have interfered to prevent it: but he effected it by night; and executed in every respect the divine mandate. The people, as might be expected, demanded that he should be given up and put to death: but, notwithstanding his father was a worshipper of Baal, he was overruled by God to protect his son, and to threaten with death any that should take part with Baal; since, if he was a god, he was able to plead for himself; and, if he was not, his worship ought not to be upheld^c.

Thus, by this successful effort, Gideon was prepared for that far greater work which he was now to undertake against the Midianites.]

3. His encouragement to it—

[The attempt, according to human appearance, was madness itself; so dispirited was the state of Israel, and so great the power of their oppressors^d. We wonder not therefore that he should request of the Lord a sign, whereby he might be assured of success in his enterprise. He begged of God that a fleece of wool should be put out into the open air, and be filled with dew, whilst all the surrounding ground was dry: and on that sign being given him, he entreated permission to reverse the sign, the fleece being kept dry, whilst all the earth around it was wet. The events corresponding with his desires, he was assured, that God could make that distinction between the

^a Judg. vi. 12—16.

^c Judg. vi. 25—32.

^b Judg. vi. 17—24.

^d Judg. vi. 2—6.

Midianites and him, which was necessary to a successful issue of his contest with them.

Thus encouraged, he entered on the office that had been assigned him; and went with two and thirty thousand men whom he had assembled, to attack the Midianites. But God knew that if so many were to go down to the attack, they would ascribe the victory to their own prowess: and therefore he ordered Gideon to dismiss from his army all who were afraid: in consequence of which no less than twenty-two thousand forsook his standard in one night. Still there was the same objection to his retaining ten thousand; and therefore God undertook to determine, by a particular test, who should go to the attack: those who on being taken to the water bowed down on their knees to drink, were not to go; but those who *in a more temperate and self-denying way* took up water in their hands and lapped it, as a dog lappeth, were to be the chosen band. But by this test no less than nine thousand seven hundred were cut off from his army, and he was left with only three hundred persons to undertake this arduous work^e.

It should seem that this reduction of his numbers filled him with some secret misgivings. God therefore graciously offered him a further sign, whereby his faith should be confirmed, and his fear altogether dispelled. This was a sign that should be given him by the enemy themselves. He was to go down with his servant to the enemy's camp, and hear what they themselves said. Accordingly he went, and heard one telling a dream that he had had, namely, that a cake of barley-bread had rolled down a hill into the camp, and had overturned a tent: which dream was immediately interpreted by his comrade, as importing that this cake was no other than the sword of Gideon, and that God had delivered Midian into Gideon's hand^f. This perfectly satisfied the mind of Gideon: he had no doubt now but that God would fulfil his promise: and in a full assurance of faith he instantly arranged every thing for the encounter^g.]

4. His success in it—

[The means he used were, no doubt, suggested to him by God himself. The little band were armed, not with sword and shield, but with a pitcher, a lamp, and a trumpet. They were instructed to surround the camp, and, at a given signal, to break their pitchers, display their lights, and sound their trumpets, and, without moving from their places, to cry, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon." This was executed in due order: and instantly a panic struck the whole host of Midian, who in their fright destroyed each other; and, when put to

^e Judg. vi. 33—39. and vii. 8.

^f ver. 9—14.

^g ver. 15—18.

flight, were followed by the other troops that had been dismissed, and were thus entirely destroyed^h.

Thus have we taken a connected view of the most important circumstances, in order that we may have our minds fully prepared for such observations as naturally arise from them.]

We proceed then,

II. To suggest some instructions arising from them—

Every part of the history is truly instructive: we may learn from it,

1. To undertake nothing in our own strength—

[Though God addressed Gideon as “a mighty man of valour,” Gideon did not presume upon his character, or think himself competent to the undertaking: yea, though commissioned by God himself, he shrunk back from the undertaking, saying, “Oh, my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.” We mean not to commend *unbelief*, but to express our approbation of *humility*. It is well to be diffident of ourselves, and to confide only in the Lord our God. We are all called to “wrestle, not only against flesh and blood, but against all the powers of darkness:” but “who is sufficient for these things?” Let us bear in mind that “we are not of ourselves sufficient even to think a good thought as of ourselves,” and that “our whole sufficiency is of God” — — —]

2. To draw back from nothing to which we are called—

[When Gideon was assured that God had called him to the work, he cheerfully addressed himself to the performance of it. His question seems to have resembled that of the blessed Virgin, rather than of Zachariasⁱ, and to have flowed from a gracious, rather than an unbelieving, principle. Thus should we act: our great labour should be to ascertain the mind and will of God; and being informed of that, we should, like Paul, when he was called to preach the Gospel, “not confer with flesh and blood,” but set ourselves to discharge our duty to the uttermost. We indeed cannot expect our call to any particular office to be made as clear as Gideon’s; but, having discovered the duties of our respective callings, we should make no account either of difficulties or of danger, but determine instantly, and in all things, to approve ourselves faithful unto God — — —]

3. To doubt of nothing wherein God promises his aid—

[Gideon is particularly commended for his faith, to which

^h ver. 19—25.

ⁱ Luke i. 18, 34.

his success in this enterprise is more especially ascribed^k. And what can we desire more than a promise of God's presence and co-operation? "If he be for us, who can be against us?" God has said, "Fear not, for *I am with thee*; be not dismayed, for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee, yea, *I will help thee*, yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness:" though therefore our enemies come forth like Goliath, and we be only like David with a sling and a stone, we need not fear the issue of the contest; for "we shall be more than conquerors through Him that loved us" — — —]

4. To take the glory of nothing which God does by us—

[God is a jealous God: and the ground of his reducing Gideon's army to three hundred men was, lest, if their numbers bore ever so small a proportion to the number of their enemies, they should ascribe to themselves the honour of the victory, instead of giving all the glory of it to God. In like manner has God treasured up for us a fulness of all blessings in Christ Jesus, and required us to live by faith upon *him*, and to receive out of *his* fulness our daily supplies of grace and strength. He would have us to glory in Christ alone, and to possess now the very spirit which we shall have in heaven, when with all the glorified saints we shall cast our crowns at his feet, and ascribe salvation to God and to the Lamb for ever and ever — — —]

^k Heb. xi. 32, 33.

CCLXVIII.

GIDEON PACIFIES THE EPHRAIMITES.

Judg. viii. 1—3. *And the men of Ephraim said unto him, Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites? And they did chide with him sharply. And he said unto them, What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer? God hath delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb: and what was I able to do in comparison of you? Then their anger was abated toward him, when he had said that.*

WE are apt to admire great military exploits, and to account men honourable in proportion to the victories they have gained: but there is a victory over ourselves that far more dignifies a man, than the most extended conquests over others. We certainly

regard Gideon as one highly renowned in the feats of war : but his defeat of all the Midianitish hosts with only three hundred men, armed with pitchers, lamps, and trumpets, is less worthy of admiration, than the self-possession he exercised towards the offended and oburgatory Ephraimites. Solomon has weighed as in a balance the different characters, and has decided in favour of him whose victory is over his own spirit : “ He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty ; and he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city^a. ”

In the transaction before us we see,

I. Whence it is that unreasonable men take offence—

There is scarcely a society or even a single family to be found, where the different members walk in perfect harmony together : in most circles there are frequent disagreements : one or other of the members is unreasonable in his expectations, and by the unquietness of his own dispositions spreads dissatisfaction and disquietude all around him. The inquiry, “ Whence come wars and fightings among you ? ” St. James answers by an appeal to our own experience ; “ Come they not hence, even from the lusts that war in your members^b ? ” The chief sources of offence are discernible in the conduct of the Ephraimites. It arises,

1. From the pride of our own hearts—

[The Ephraimites had evidently a high conceit of their own dignity, and were offended that Gideon had not paid as much deference to them, as they supposed themselves entitled to. And from this root of bitterness it is that so many disputes arise. “ Only by pride cometh contention, ” is the testimony of God himself^c. See the proud man, swelling with a sense of his own importance : if you differ from him in judgment, or act contrary to his will, yea, if you do not comply with his humour in every thing, he is quite indignant, and bursts forth into a rage. Even the best-meant endeavours cannot always please him : as an inferior, he cannot brook the least restraint : as a superior, he never thinks that sufficient homage is paid him : and as an equal, he cannot endure that others should

^a Prov. xvi. 32.

^b Jam. iv. 1.

^c Prov. xiii. 10.

exercise the liberty which he arrogates to himself^d. To what an extent this domineering principle will prevail, we may see in the instance of Nebuchadnezzar; who, because of the conscientious refusal of the Hebrew youths to bow down to his idol, "was full of fury; and the form of his visage was changed against them; and he ordered the furnace to be made seven times hotter than usual," in order to destroy them^e. Truly there is no principle in the heart more adverse to the peace and happiness of mankind than this.]

2. From envy at others—

[Great honour accrued to Gideon and the Abi-ezrites from the victory that had been gained: and the Ephraimites were grieved that others should possess a glory, in which themselves had no share. Hence they broke forth into revilings against Gideon. The same principle also prevails more or less in all: "The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy^f:" and how nearly it is allied with wrath, we see from those words of Eliphaz, "Wrath killeth the foolish man; and envy slayeth the silly one^g." The examples of Cain^h, and Joseph's brethrenⁱ, and Saul^k, sufficiently mark the murderous tendency of this malignant passion. One evil peculiar to it is, that it makes excellence itself the object of its attack; as Solomon has observed, "For every right work a man is envied of his neighbour^l." Hence that pointed question, "Who can stand before envy^m?" Not the benevolence of the Apostles, nor the blameless conduct of our Lord himself, could ward off its malignant shafts: and wherever it exists, it will be attended with "strife, railings, evil surmisings, and perverse disputingsⁿ."]]

3. From impetuosity of spirit—

[The Ephraimites would not give themselves any time for reflection or inquiry, but instantly began with violent invectives. It should seem that they were a hasty people, full of pride and wrath: and on another occasion precisely similar to this, they suffered for it in no slight degree; for no less than two and forty thousand of them were slain in consequence of it^o. Had they been at the pains of making inquiry, they would have found that Gideon had committed no offence at all: he had acted altogether by the direction of God: and so far was he from being at liberty to increase his army by the accession of the Ephraimites, that he was necessitated to reduce the thirty-two thousand troops which he had raised to

^d Prov. xxviii. 25.

^e Dan. iii. 19.

^f Jam. iv. 5.

^g Job v. 2.

^h Gen. iv. 5.

ⁱ Gen. xxxvii. 11, 18.

^k 1 Sam. xviii. 8, 9.

^l Eccl. iv. 4.

^m Prov. xxvii. 4.

ⁿ 1 Tim. vi. 4. Jam. iii. 16.

^o Judg. xii. 1—7.

three hundred. Thus it is that innumerable quarrels arise, when a moment's inquiry would shew, that no reason for them exists, or at least no reason for such resentment as is felt by the offended person. Behold David, when Nabal had refused him the refreshments which he desired: nothing short of the death of Nabal and all his adherents was deemed a sufficient atonement for his offence. But when Abigail had brought David to reflection, he found that his vindictive purposes were highly criminal; and that, if his anger was not groundless, it far exceeded that which the occasion called for^p. In a word, this hastiness of temper prevents men from listening to the dictates of reason, and makes them deaf to every consideration of truth and equity.]

The readiness with which unreasonable men take offence, makes it important to inquire,

II. How judicious men may pacify it—

Truly admirable was the conduct of Gideon on this occasion: and his success may well recommend it to our imitation. Indeed the general rules deducible from it are as good as any that can be suggested. When a person is offended at us without a cause, we should endeavour, as far as circumstances will admit of it, to calm his mind,

1. By patience and forbearance—

[Not a word of recrimination dropped from the mouth of Gideon. He might perhaps have justly said, that when the Ephraimites knew his determination to oppose the Midianites, they had never offered their services, or come forward to assist him in the undertaking: but, when the danger was over, they were ready to impute evil to him for omissions which were chargeable only on themselves. But he did not so much as glance at any thing that might either betray irritation in his own mind, or strengthen it in theirs. Though “they did chide sharply with him,” he bore it with a meekness that was truly amiable and praiseworthy. Now this was an excellent way to conciliate their minds, even if he had deserved all the blame that they imputed to him: Solomon justly observes, that “yielding pacifieth great offences^q.” It is recrimination that fans the flame, and causes it to burst forth into destructive quarrels. The common progress of disputes may be seen in the case of Israel and Judah after the death of Absalom; where, each of them justifying his own cause, the result was, that the dispute on both sides grew, till the accused were more incensed

^p 1 Sam. xxv. 32—35.

^q Eccl. x. 4.

than even the accusers ; and “the words of the men of Judah were fiercer than the words of the men of Israel^r.” Silence therefore is the best remedy, at least till the offended person is so far calmed as to listen readily to the voice of reason : and though the advice of Solomon appears at first sight as paradoxical and absurd, yet it is the best that can be offered ; “Leave off contention before it be meddled with^s :” for it will be difficult enough to leave it off when once it is begun.]

2. By humility and self-denial—

[Gideon might justly have said, “If God has been pleased to honour me, why should that give any umbrage to you?” But he forbore to take to himself the credit that was his due, or to claim from them the approbation he had merited at their hands. Thus he hid from them the light which had pained their eyes, and cast a veil over the actions which had provoked their jealousy. This was a striking instance of that “charity which vaunteth not itself, and seeketh not her own^t.” This is a disposition which tends no less to the preservation of our own happiness than it does to the conciliating of those who are offended at us : for when once we are willing to forego the honour to which we are entitled, it will appear a small thing to us to be censured without a cause ; seeing that such censures only reduce us to the place which we were previously in our own minds prepared to occupy. And it will almost invariably be found true, that, as men are ready to hate those who arrogate honour to themselves, so will they be more easily reconciled to those who are humble and unassuming.]

3. By commendation and love—

[Gideon, instead of loading his adversaries with blame, was glad to search out causes for commending them. The Ephraimites, though they offered not themselves in the first instance, were of great service in pursuing and destroying the routed foe. They took the two hostile princes, Oreb and Zeeb : and though this was only the gleanings of Gideon’s vintage, yet does Gideon speak of it as incomparably greater than any thing that had been done by him. And it is particularly deserving of notice, that *this* was the word which produced the desired effect ; “Then their anger was abated, when he had said *that*.” Thus it appears, that “a soft answer turneth away wrath^u ;” and that, if we would blunt the edge of other men’s displeasure, we should study to conform ourselves to that sublime precept ; “Let nothing be done through strife and vain-glory ; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves^x.”]

^r 2 Sam. xix. 41—43.

^s Prov. xvii. 14.

^t 1 Cor. xiii. 4, 5.

^u Prov. xv. 1.

^x Phil. ii. 3.

On this subject we would found a word or two of
ADVICE—

1. Be cautious not too hastily to take offence—

[Innumerable circumstances may exist, which, if known to us, would make us form a very different judgment of men and things, from that which at first sight we have entertained^y. To weigh, and consider, and inquire, is the part of true wisdom: but to be precipitate is a certain indication of folly^z— — —]

2. If offence be taken at you, labour to the utmost to pacify it—

[This was a leading feature in the character of Jesus^a; and it must be so in that of all his followers^b— — — “To feed our enemies, and heap coals of fire on their heads,” is the Christian’s duty: therefore, “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good^c.”]

^y See this illustrated Josh. xxii. 11—34.

^z Eccl. vii. 9.

^a Jam. i. 19, 20.

^b Eph. iv. 1—3. and Col. iii. 12, 13.

^c Rom. xii. 20, 21.

CCLXIX.

FAINT, YET PURSUING.

Judg. viii. 4. *Faint, yet pursuing.*

THERE are those who speak of Gideon as a type of Christ. But, excepting as a deliverer raised up in an extraordinary manner to Israel, there is scarcely sufficient correspondence between him and our blessed Lord to justify such a representation of him. As an example to the Church in all ages, and especially as illustrating for our benefit the power and efficacy of faith, we can have no hesitation in commending him to your most particular attention: for he is not only set forth in Scripture under that character in common with many other eminent men, but, together with David and Samuel, he is proposed to us as a pattern which we are bound to follow: “Seeing that we are encompassed with such *a cloud of witnesses*, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that doth so easily beset us, and let us run with

patience the race that is set before us^a." I would notice him, therefore, under the two-fold character of *A deliverer to Israel*, and *A model to us*: or, rather, instead of separating the two, I will combine them; that so the whole subject may come before us in a more luminous and useful point of view.

Let us, then, notice respecting Gideon,

I. His ready obedience to the divine call—

When convinced that God had called him to fight for Israel, he delayed not to execute his commission—

[The Midianites had grievously oppressed Israel. By a kind of predatory warfare, they annually desolated the whole land. Gideon was threshing out some corn, in order to hide it from the Midianites: and God sent an angel to inform him, that, through his instrumentality, the country should be delivered from its invaders. This seemed to be an hopeless and almost impossible event: but when God had shewn him, by repeated signs, that the office of delivering Israel was committed to him, he cheerfully obeyed the call, and addressed himself to the work assigned him^b — — —]

The same promptitude, Brethren, is expected at your hands—

[You are called to war against the enemies of God and his people. Satan has exercised a most tyrannic sway over the whole world, "leading them captive at his will." But the Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the trumpet to be sounded throughout all your coasts, that you may flock to his standard, and arm yourselves for the combat. Let none say, The enemy is too powerful for me; I cannot venture to oppose him. The command is absolute; and every one of you must gird on his armour, and prepare to "war a good warfare." Let there be no reluctance, Brethren, no timidity, no "conferring with flesh and blood." It is a disgraceful bondage to which you have been subjected: and the time is come for you to free yourselves from it. I call on all of you, therefore, to obey the summons, and in every possible way to approve yourselves "good soldiers of Jesus Christ."]

But be sure to follow in this,

II. His simple dependence on divine aid—

Admirably did Gideon's faith display itself on this occasion—

^a Heb. xi. 32, 33. and xii. 1.

^b Judg. vi. 1—35.

[Most particularly is *this* noticed in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "By faith Gideon and the others subdued kingdoms^c." There came, in obedience to his summons, two-and-thirty thousand men. But God directed him to dismiss from amongst them all who were timid: and instantly was his army reduced to ten thousand men. But even these were more than God chose to employ: and therefore Gideon was ordered to bring them down to a stream, and to separate those who lapped like a dog, from those who bowed down to drink like cattle; and to reserve the former only for his companions in arms. Of those who lapped, there were only three hundred; and these were all who were left him to go against the Midianites, who amounted in all to one hundred and thirty-five thousand men. But not even these were to be employed in one compact body: no: scarcely two of them were to be together: they were to occupy an immense tract of ground, surrounding the whole camp of Midian. Nor were they to make a simultaneous attack: but to take, every one of them, a pitcher and a lamp and a trumpet, and to break their pitchers and blow their trumpets, and to stand in their place, crying, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon." What an armament, and what a disposal of the troops, according to the judgment of sense, was this! It was the direct way to have every soul amongst them slain in an instant: for not one of them could escape through darkness; since every one held his lamp, as it were, for the express purpose of making himself a mark for the spear or sword of his enemy^d. But Gideon presumed not to sit in judgment on the directions given him. It was sufficient for him to know what God's appointment was; and to that he submitted, without hesitation or delay.]

It is also the good fight of faith which you are now called to fight—

[There must be no dependence on an arm of flesh. You must "go forth in the strength of the Lord," and of him only. To overcome through the simple exercise of faith, may appear strange; but it is the way appointed by God himself, who will have all the honour of your success, and will suffer "no flesh to glory in his presence." "To stand still, and see the salvation of God" with you, may appear to savour of presumption: but it is infinitely greater presumption to invade the prerogative of God, and to take on ourselves the work that belongs to him alone. The proclamation of his name, and the exhibition of his light, are doubtless proper, as his appointed means for advancing his own glory; but of themselves they can effect no more for the subjugation of our

^c Heb. xi. 33.

^d Judg. vii. 1—21.

enemies, than could the blowing of trumpets to destroy the walls of Jericho, or the breaking of pitchers to subdue the armies of Midian and of Amalek. It is "by faith you are to walk, and not by sight:" and "according to your faith it shall be done unto you."]

You must further imitate,

III. His full determination never to relax his efforts—

Gideon, "though faint" from the excess of his exertions, "yet pursued" his enemies—

[A panic having struck the Midianites, they, by mistake, slew one another, so that not less than one-hundred-and-twenty thousand of them fell that night. The remaining fifteen thousand fled. Now Gideon might well have said, The enemy is so weakened, that they cannot invade us any more: I will now, therefore, with my little band of soldiers, take my rest. But he would not on any account act thus. As long as there were any of his enemies remaining, he would pursue them. Though he was quite "faint" with fatigue, he would not cease from his exertions; but followed them, and fell upon them, and slew them, and took captive both their kings, both Zebah and Zalmunna.]

What a bright example is here for *us*!

[There must, of necessity, be times and seasons when we are ready to faint in our great warfare, and to wish, as it were, for some relaxation from our labour. Who has not experienced both weariness in duties, and dejection of mind, too, in the conflicts which he has had to sustain? But it must be time enough for us to rest when we get to heaven. St. Paul was "troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed^e:" "for which cause he fainted not^f." So must it be with us: whatever progress we have made, we must "forget the things which are behind, and press forward to that which is before." "We must never be weary in well-doing," or, if weary *in* it, we must never be weary *of* it. Whoever sees us, must see us still "pursuing," and determining never to rest, till every enemy be subdued, and "Satan himself be for ever bruised under our feet."]

Above all, we must follow him in,

IV. His assured expectation of ultimate success—

This was very conspicuous—

[His own countrymen, both of Succoth and Penuel, refused even to administer food to his weary soldiers, lest the

^e 2 Cor. iv. 8, 9.

^f 2 Cor. iv. 16.

Midianites should visit it with signal judgments, after having recovered from their present panic. They even ridiculed the sanguine expectations of Gideon, saying, "Are Zebah and Zalmunna yet fallen into thy hands, that I should incense them by giving relief to thee?" But, notwithstanding the Midianites were fifty times as numerous as he, he expresses no doubt of final victory over them, and declares to his ungrateful countrymen how he will punish their ingratitude on his return from the expedition.]

Thus should we also "hold fast our confidence firm unto the end"—

[Whatever victories we may have gained, our enemies would soon vanquish us, if we were left to ourselves. But we should never for a moment give way to unbelieving fears. We should neither consider our own weakness, nor the strength of our enemies; but should regard the mightiest foes merely "as bread for us;" as bread, which we shall devour, even "as the ox licketh up the grass of the field." We should "know in whom we have believed;" and "be confident of this very thing, that He who hath begun the good work in us will carry it on, and perfect it until the day of Christ." However powerful our adversaries may appear, we should say to them, "Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain." Has God said, "No weapon that is formed against us shall prosper?" We should go on in full anticipation of victory, and in a certain assurance, that, whatever conflicts we may have to maintain, we shall be "more than conquerors, through Him that loved us."]

APPLICATION—

[Are any of you faint, my beloved Brethren? I will not act the part of the men of Penuel or Succoth, but will most gladly set before you all the richest provisions which we possess. Here is bread of the finest quality, "the very bread that came down from heaven," that will not only strengthen and refresh your souls, but actually give life to the dead: and, if you eat to the full of that, you shall go on in the strength of it to the latest hour of your lives. Consider under whose banners you fight; even under the banners of the Lord Jesus Christ himself — — — Consider with whom you are contending: they are vanquished enemies; as our Lord himself has told us: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" — — — Consider where your strength lies: not in yourselves, but in the Captain of your salvation, who has said, that "his grace shall be sufficient for you," and "his strength be perfected in your weakness" — — — Consider, finally, what will be the fruits of victory; even glory and honour and immortality, in the presence, and in the bosom, of your God — — —

Will you, then, draw back? God forbid! Let me rather urge you to proceed: for, faint as ye are, ye shall surely overcome. Of Gideon's army, so far as we know, there died not one; whilst the entire host of his enemies were slain. So shall all the powers of darkness fall before you, and not so much as a hair of your head shall perish. "It is not the will of your Father that one of his little ones should perish." In a word, "Be not weary in well-doing: for in due season you shall reap, if you faint not."]

CCLXX.

GIDEON CHASTISES THE MEN OF SUCCOTH AND PENUEL.

Judg. viii. 15—17. *And he came unto the men of Succoth, and said, Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, with whom ye did upbraid me, saying, Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand, that we should give bread unto thy men that are weary? And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. And he beat down the tower of Penuel, and slew the men of the city.*

CONSISTENCY is essential to the character of a child of God. But pious persons are very apt to err in judging of the consistency of others: they would have been ready to condemn the conduct of Paul in relation to many things which he did at one time and forbore to do at another. We do not in general make sufficient allowance for a change of circumstances, which may not only warrant, but demand, a change of conduct. All would admire the gentleness and forbearance of Gideon, when the Ephraimites blamed him so vehemently for not summoning them to the battle against the Midianites^a; but probably they would accuse him of severity and injustice towards the men of Succoth and of Penuel: whereas his firmness in chastising *these* was no less proper under his peculiar circumstances, than his kindness in forgiving *them*. The two cases were not at all parallel: the Ephraimites at least thought honourably of the cause in which Gideon was embarked; but the men of Succoth and of Penuel treated it with contempt. Now the cause was that of God himself: and for

^a ver. 1—3.

despising it, the men of Succoth and of Penuel deserved all that they suffered. Let us consider,

I. The punishment inflicted on them—

The provocation they gave was exceeding great—

[Gideon had already destroyed one-hundred-and-twenty thousand of the Midianitish army; and was now pursuing with his three hundred men the remnant, who had escaped the general carnage. He had crossed over Jordan, and was following them with all possible ardour; but his men having been engaged all the preceding night and day without any intermission or any refreshment, were faint: Gideon therefore, in passing through Succoth, a city of the tribe of Gad, requested in the kindest manner some provisions for his men: but the elders of the city only insulted him, and endeavoured to weaken his hands by deriding the vanity of his attempts. Gideon would not lose any time in debating the matter with them, but warned them, that when God should have delivered the Midianites into his hand, he would scourge them all with briers and thorns^b. He then went forward to Penuel, a neighbouring city; but was insulted by its elders precisely as he had been by the men of Succoth. It should seem that the men of Penuel confided in a tower which they had, and thought themselves safer in that, than they could be by any efforts of Gideon, or of God himself in their behalf. Gideon therefore threatened them with heavier vengeance, when God should have delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into his hands: for, though their ingratitude was the same with that of the men of Succoth, there was in their answer somewhat more of atheistical impiety, which was the ground of a severer sentence against them^c.]

The punishment he inflicted on them was just—

[Gideon pressed forward, weak and faint as he was, and came upon the Midianites, when they conceived themselves to be perfectly secure: and God blessed his efforts, so that the fifteen thousand Midianites were destroyed, and their two kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, taken, without the loss of a man belonging to the host of Gideon. Instantly did Gideon return, with his royal captives, to the two ungrateful cities which had refused him sustenance; and executed on their elders the vengeance he had threatened: he punished those of Succoth with briers and thorns; and those of Penuel with death, and the destruction of their boasted tower.

Now we say that this was *just*. Had the injury which he had sustained been purely personal, it would have become him to pass it by, and to leave the punishment of it to a righteous

^b ver. 7.

^c ver. 9.

God, who says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." But he acted as a magistrate who was authorized to punish the treason of which these persons had been guilty. Considered as an act of ingratitude only, it was exceeding sinful; for what could be more base than to refuse a meal to those who had at the peril of their own lives delivered the whole nation from the yoke of Midian; and were now, though only three hundred in number, following the remaining fugitives, fifty times as numerous as themselves, in order to extirpate them entirely? But it was treason, both against the state, and against God: it was the very way to prevent the execution of Gideon's designs against the enemies of God and his people: and, if God had not miraculously renewed the strength of the victors, this refusal of food to them would have done more to vanquish them than all the hosts of Midian had been able to effect. If Gideon had demanded that the men of Succoth and of Penuel should join in the pursuit, he would have required no more than he was authorized to do^d: and he might justly, considering whose cause he was engaged in, have punished them severely for a refusal^e: but when his request was so moderate, and his necessity so urgent, and the probable consequences of their refusal so injurious to the whole nation, he did right in making an example of such wicked traitors.]

Having vindicated this act of justice, let us proceed to notice,

II. The lessons it suggests to us—

It is very instructive to us both,

1. In a civil view—

[The men of Succoth and of Penuel well illustrate the character and conduct of many amongst ourselves. The burthens of war must of necessity be borne by all the nation^f: and methinks they should be cheerfully borne by every member of the community: for, to whom do we owe our security, but to those who are standing forth in our defence, and, under God, are combating our enemies with success? It is true, we feel the pressure of the taxes as a burthen; and by means of them we are deprived of comforts which we might otherwise enjoy: but what are our privations in comparison of those which are experienced by our fleets and armies? Little do we think

^d The Ephraimites had not only acknowledged this, but had thought themselves slighted because it had not been done, ver. 1.

^e See Judg. v. 23.

^f Preached at the time of the French Revolution. Of course, if made the subject of a discourse, it must be accommodated to existing circumstances. But it will be found generally applicable *in a time of war*.

what they have to bear; or what obligations we owe to them for exposing themselves to so many fatigues and dangers in our defence. Shall we then grudge to the state whatever is necessary for their support? Is not the murmuring on account of our burthens, and the striving to elude them, highly criminal? The men of Succoth and of Penuel had some excuse for their ungenerous conduct: for they intimated, that, by contributing to aid Gideon in the pursuit, they should only bring on themselves the heavier vengeance from the Midianites, as soon as ever they should have recovered from their panic. But what excuse have we? Their interest seemed to lie on the side of neutrality; but ours is altogether on the side of energy and exertion. Let us only consider what our enemies would exact of us, if they were to reduce us under their power: truly "their little finger would be heavier than the loins" of our own governors: instead therefore of grudging what is necessary for the support of our government, we should rejoice and bless God for the security that we enjoy under their watchful care.]

2. In a religious view—

[The whole of that astonishing transaction tends to inspire us with confidence in God, and to encourage our exertions in his cause. But there are two lessons in particular which we shall do well to learn from it: the one is, *To prosecute the spiritual warfare under all discouragements ourselves*; and the other is, *To put no discouragements in the way of others*.

That we shall find discouragements in our warfare is certain; sometimes from the number and power of our enemies; sometimes from the fewness and weakness of our friends; sometimes from the inefficacy of our past exertions; and sometimes from the protracted continuance of a struggle which we had fondly hoped to have seen terminated long before. But we must go forth, like Gideon, in the strength of the Lord, and, though "faint, must yet be pursuing;" nor must we ever look for rest, till we have gotten the final victory over all our enemies. We must remember, Whose cause it is; Under whose banners we are enlisted; Whom we have for our Guide and Protector; and, Whose word is pledged for our final success. What though he reduce the number of our friends to ever so low an ebb? What though he send us forth with no better armour than a trumpet and a lamp? What though our enemies be so great and numerous, that, after having been vanquished by us a thousand times, they still appear, according to human apprehension, invincible by such an arm as ours? What though we be so feeble that we seem incapable of continuing the contest any longer? Shall we give over? No: we must still fight on,

assured of victory; knowing, that "when we are weak, then are we strong;" that "God will perfect his own strength in our weakness;" and that, "if God be for us, none can" possibly succeed "against us."

At the same time that other lesson must be attended to, Not to put any discouragement in the way of others. Almost all people are ready to obstruct, rather than to aid, the Christian in his spiritual progress. Those of the same family and kindred will discountenance his zeal; and even some who profess to be of the true Israel, will represent his duties as impracticable, and his efforts as hopeless. But God is indignant with those who would weaken the hands of his people. He would have us rather encourage one another to the utmost of our power. His command is, "Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees; say unto them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not; your God will come and help you^h." It is said of our Lord, that "he will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax, but will bring forth judgment unto victory:" let us, like him, "carry the lambs in our bosom, and gently lead those that are with young;" yea, let us so unite our efforts with theirs, that we may be sharers in their triumphs, and partakers of their glory.]

^h Isai. xxxv. 3, 4. and Heb. xii. 13.

CCLXXI.

JOTHAM'S PARABLE.

Judg. ix. 7—15. *And when they told it to Jotham, he went and stood in the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried, and said unto them, Hearken unto me, ye men of Shechem, that God may hearken unto you. The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive-tree, Reign thou over us. But the olive-tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? And the trees said to the fig-tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig-tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.*

THE method of instructing by parables is of great antiquity: it obtained among the Jews from the earliest period of their history: but the first that is recorded, and indeed the first extant in the world, is that which we have just read. The peculiar excellence of that mode of instruction is, that it arrests the attention more forcibly, and conveys knowledge more easily, than a train of reasoning could do; and convinces the judgment, before that prejudice has had time to bar the entrance of truth into the mind. The parable before us is exceeding beautiful, and admirably adapted to the occasion on which it was spoken. That we may open it fully, we shall consider, I. The occasion of it—

Gideon had refused the promotion which all Israel had offered him—

[After the expulsion of the Midianites, “the men of Israel proposed to make Gideon their king, and to perpetuate that honour in his family: but Gideon, having no reason to think that this invitation was from God, and being desirous that God alone should be the king of his people, declined the honour, saying, “The Lord shall rule over you^a.” At the same time, wishing to preserve the remembrance of those astonishing victories which God had wrought for them by him, he requested his victorious soldiers to give him the golden earrings which they had taken from the Midianites, together with the chains which were about the necks of their camels: and with them he made a very splendid ephod, which was consecrated unto God. Whether he intended to make use of this ephod in the place of that which had been made for Aaron^b, we cannot say; but we have no doubt of his having sincerely intended to honour God by it; though, alas! through the proneness of the heart to superstition and idolatry, “it became a snare to him, and to his house^c.” In a word, he affected not honour for himself and his family, but desired only that God should be glorified.]

After his death however, Abimelech aspired to, and gained, the throne of Israel—

[Gideon had seventy sons by many different wives; and, by a concubine, one, whom he called Abimelech. This bastard-son, being of an ambitious mind, made use of his mother's relations to impress the minds of the Shechemites with an

^a Judg. viii. 22, 23. ^b Exod. xxviii. 6—12. ^c Judg. viii. 27.

idea, that all the seventy sons of Gideon would be so many petty tyrants among them; and that it would be better for them to have one king over them, than so many; and that, if they were of that opinion, they would do better to choose Abimelech, who was related to them, than any of the others, who had no particular interest in their welfare. Having thus insinuated himself into the favour of the Shechemites, he prevailed upon them to supply him with money out of the treasury of Baal-berith, their idol: and with that "he hired vain and light persons" to go with him and murder all his seventy brethren. *What an awful proof is this, of the cruel nature of ambition, which could instigate him to such an inhuman act; and of the ease with which instruments may be procured to perpetrate any evil that the human heart can conceive!* The deliberation with which this bloody man executed his project, was truly astonishing: one would have supposed, at least, that he would murder them all hastily in their beds; but, as though he delighted in that accursed work, he brought them all forth, and "slew them all *on one stone*^d." Jotham alone, the youngest of them all, escaped: and, when he was informed that Abimelech had been made king, he availed himself of an opportunity which some public meeting of the Shechemites afforded him, to stand on Mount Gerizim, and address the principal inhabitants. His address was short, as one would naturally expect: but it was much to the purpose; and it was contained in the parable which we have read, together with a brief application of it to their own conduct.]

Such was the occasion of the parable: we proceed to explain,

II. The import—

Two leading truths are contained in it;

1. That worthless men affect the honours which the wise and good decline—

[The character of the wise and good is fitly represented by those valuable trees, the olive, the fig, and the vine. The olive-tree was useful for the honouring of God in the sacrifices, and man in his attainment of royal or priestly honours: the fig-tree was productive of most delicious fruit: and the vine, by its generous juices, cheered the heart of man, at the same time that it afforded acceptable libations unto God. What more beautiful images could have been found, whereby to portray the character of a man who lives only to honour God, and to benefit his fellow-creatures? Such a man was Gideon; who, sensible of the snares and difficulties of royalty, was

^d ver. 5, 18.

desirous rather to do good in the station in which God had placed him, than, by an elevation to a higher sphere, to encumber himself with anxious and unproductive cares^e.

On the other hand, the bramble fitly represented a worthless person, who, grasping at power, is ready to obtain it by any means; and, whilst he is extravagant in his demands of confidence, is cruel and oppressive to all who are not subservient to his will. Such exactly was Abimelech: he promised great things to Shechem, whilst he gave them, in the first moment of his advancement, an evidence of his atrocity, and a sure pledge of his future tyranny.

What was primarily intended to mark the characters of Gideon and Abimelech, is applicable to man in every age. The wise and good are unambitious. If clearly called of God to any office, they undertake it, as Gideon did, for the Lord's sake: but they do not seek advancement for themselves: they do not affect situations of dignity and power: they cultivate an humble and contented mind; and study rather to be *good* than great. Not so the noisy demagogue, who depreciates and defames others, only the more effectually to exalt himself.]

2. That they who unduly affect honour, and they who unjustly confer it, will prove sources of misery to each other—

[This was intimated in the parable, but more fully explained in the subsequent application of it. Jotham appealed to the consciences of the men of Shechem, whether they had acted as they ought to have done towards Gideon and his family: if they could say they had, he wished them every benefit from Abimelech's administration, which they themselves could desire: but, if not, then he warned them that they would prove a curse to each other^f.

And this also is a general truth, that usurpers seldom fail of being a curse to the people whom they govern, and that those who aided them in their usurpation rarely continue faithful to them in a day of adversity. Were an instance wanted to confirm this truth, we need only look at all the powers of Europe who have been successively cajoled and injured by the great oppressor of the continent; who, having waded to his throne through seas of blood, stops not at any measures that may consolidate or extend his ill-gotten authority. And what returns he will receive from those who have contributed to his exaltation, time will shew: but, as he is even now regarded by them as a plague to the earth, it will

^e The marginal reading is, "*To go up and down for other trees;*" which is strongly expressive of this idea.

^f ver. 16—20.

be a miracle if they do not, when a fit opportunity occurs, prove also a plague to him^g.]

This parable was in the nature of a prophecy; of which we now proceed to consider,

III. The accomplishment—

[Never was a prophecy more exactly fulfilled. "The triumph of the wicked is short." For three years Abimelech enjoyed the fruit of his wickedness: but then God "sent an evil spirit between him and the Shechemites," and stirred them up to "deal treacherously with him^h." What the cause of their disaffection was, we know not: but they so hated him, as to set assassins to lie in wait for him, and destroy himⁱ. Their disloyalty appearing, one soon rose up to foment the division, and to head the conspiracy. Turbulent persons are never wanting to fan the flames of discord, and to seek their own elevation on the ruin of others. Such an one was *Gaal*, who, though probably a Canaanite, proposed himself as the fitter person to govern the state, and encouraged them at a drunken revel to curse and execrate Abimelech. *Zebul* however, a chief officer in the city, retained, though covertly, his allegiance to Abimelech; and sent him word of all that passed, together with directions for crushing the conspiracy. At the same time he endeavoured to lull asleep the fears of *Gaal*, so that he might be taken by surprise; and, when *Gaal* could no longer be deceived, he urged him, in the same derisive strain, to go forth and meet his adversary in the field of battle: but no sooner had *Gaal* gone forth, than *Zebul* interposed to cut off his retreat to the city^k. The plan of *Zebul* succeeded: Abimelech speedily overthrew *Gaal* and his adherents; then he proceeded to fight against the other conspirators in the city; and, having taken the city, he slew all its inhabitants. Some indeed took refuge in a tower; which however, by cutting down branches of trees from an adjacent wood, and setting them on fire, he instantly destroyed, together with a thousand people that were in it. Having desolated thus the whole place, he beat down the city, and sowed it with salt, in token that its destruction should be perpetual^l.

The revenge of Abimelech, one might have supposed, would by this time have been satisfied: but it was not so: for, as there were many dissatisfied persons at Thebez also, a neighbouring city, he went and slew them also: and, when some

^g How abundantly has this been verified, since the Tyrant's Retreat from Moscow! Many of his Allies in the invasion of Russia contributed afterwards to his downfall, and to his present humiliation at St. Helena. (Written in 1825.)

^h ver. 23. ⁱ ver. 25. ^k ver. 26—38, 41. ^l ver. 39—49.

of them also took refuge in a tower, he proceeded to use the same stratagem against them: but being grown incautious from success, he went too near the tower, so that a woman threw a piece of a millstone upon his head, and brake his skull: and he, indignant at the thought of being killed by a woman, “ordered his armour-bearer to slay him, that it might not be said, A woman slew him^m.”

Behold now how exactly the parable was verified! “God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and his subjects,” *on purpose* that their ingratitude to Gideon and his family might be punishedⁿ; and the issue of the contest, *as the historian remarks*, was a literal accomplishment of Jotham’s prediction; Abimelech and the Shechemites mutually proving a scourge and a curse to each other^o.]

From this history then we may LEARN,

1. To be unambitious in prosperity—

[Never had man a better opportunity to gratify ambition than Gideon: yet he forbore to do it, and preferred the station which God in his providence had assigned him. In this he was truly wise. The acquisition of power is, in fact, the dereliction of ease. The increase of comforts by means of it bears no proportion to the increase of cares. Solomon in all his grandeur found nothing but “vanity and vexation of spirit.” Jeremiah’s advice to Baruch is worthy the attention of all: “Seekest thou great things unto thyself? seek them not.”]

2. To be patient in adversity—

[Great indeed was the cause of complaint which Jotham had both against Abimelech and the Shechemites: yet behold, here were no invectives against them: he contented himself with simply declaring in God’s name his testimony against them. Had he been an uninterested person, he could not have borne his testimony in milder terms. This is a pattern which we shall do well to follow. Let us therefore “not render evil for evil, or railing for railing,” but “commit ourselves to Him who judgeth righteously.”]

3. To look forward to a future time of retribution—

[We may appear for a season to succeed, and to reap a pleasant fruit from the iniquities we have sown. But what did Abimelech’s success avail him at the end of three years? and what thinks he of all his murders at this hour? So we may appear to succeed in the acquisition of unlawful pleasures or dishonest gains: but what shall we reap from such practices in a little time? and what comfort will our confederates in iniquity afford us at the last day? Now the vile seducer or the base

^m ver. 50—54.

ⁿ ver. 23, 24.

^o ver. 56, 57.

adulterer may rejoice in, and with, his guilty companions: but what execrations will they mutually vent against each other, when God's time is come! Know ye, Beloved, that "evil pursueth sinners;" and "though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished."]

CCLXXII.

JEPHTHAH'S VOW.

Judg. xi. 30, 31. *And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt-offering.*

VOWS were common under the Mosaic dispensation: they were even encouraged by God himself, in order that his people might have opportunities of manifesting the love that was in their hearts by offerings that were not enjoined, and services that were not commanded. In cases of difficulty, where it appeared of more than ordinary importance to secure the divine favour and protection, the patriarchs had resorted to vows, and bound themselves, in case he should vouchsafe to them the desired blessing, to render unto him according to the benefits he should confer upon them. Thus Jacob, when he had just left his father and family in order to seek in a foreign land a refuge from his brother's vengeance, vowed, that, if the Lord would be with him and restore him to his home in peace, he would take God entirely for his God, and devote to him a tenth of all that he should possess^a. In the time of Moses, the whole people of Israel resorted to the same measure, in order to obtain success against the Canaanites^b. This, it must be confessed, has a legal appearance, and looks like offering to make a bargain with God: but vows may certainly be made in perfect consistency with the liberal spirit of the Gospel: for it is intimated, that under the Gospel, yea even in the millennial age, such a practice should

^a Gen. xxviii. 20—22.

^b Numb. xxi. 2.

obtain^c; and we know that Paul both made a vow himself^d, and united with others in services to which by a voluntary engagement they had bound themselves^e.

The vow of Jephthah has engaged the attention of learned men in all ages: but they are by no means agreed as to the import of it. We propose,

I. To explain his vow—

It must be confessed, that the Jewish writers in general, together with their great historian Josephus, were of opinion, that Jephthah offered his daughter to the Lord as a burnt-offering. Of the same opinion also were the generality of writers in the early ages of the Christian Church. Multitudes also of the most approved authors amongst the moderns take the same side of the question. But we are constrained to differ from them; and the more attentively we have weighed their arguments, the more fully are we persuaded that Jephthah did not offer up his daughter as a burnt-offering, but only devoted her to the service, *the exclusive* service, of the Lord.

In confirmation of this opinion, we would call your attention to the particular circumstances of the vow:

1. The making of it—

[In opposition to the idea of his offering her up for a burnt-offering, we say, that *No pious man would have made such a vow.* Jephthah was undoubtedly a pious man, as his whole history declares: for at his first acceding to the proposals of his countrymen to stand forth for their deliverance, he laid the matter before the Lord^f: and his vow was expressive of his affiance alone in God for success: besides which, he is celebrated by St. Paul as one of those eminent men who obtained a good report through their faith^g. Moreover, he was at this time under the influence of the Spirit of God^h. Now can we suppose that such a man, under such influence, should deliberately vow to God that he would commit murder? that he would murder the first person who should come forth to congratulate him, whether it might be man, woman, or child, yea even if it should be his own, his only daughter? or, if a dog or other unclean animal should come forth, he would offer it up for a burnt-offering? Could he conceive that this would

^c Isai. xix. 21.

^d Acts xviii. 18.

^e Acts xxi. 23, 24.

^f ver. 11.

^g Heb. xi. 32.

^h ver. 29.

be pleasing to the Deity, and that such a vow as this would be likely to procure success? Had not the law said, "Thou shalt not killⁱ?" and had not God expressly forbidden his people to imitate the heathen in offering *human* sacrifices^k? Had not the law prescribed, that if a man should *unintentionally* kill his *slave*, he should be punished^l? and could he imagine that the law permitted him *intentionally* and *deliberately* to kill his own *daughter*? It may be said, that the Spirit ordered him to offer up this sacrifice, just as God commanded Abraham to offer up his son Isaac: but I ask, Where is any such thing expressed in this history? and why, if the Spirit of God had ordered a human sacrifice to be made, and he under the influence of the Spirit had vowed to offer one, whence came the rending of his garment, and all his vehement lamentation, upon finding that his daughter was the appointed victim? If he had been called to Abraham's trial, we may well suppose that God would have given to him the faith of Abraham; or at least, that, if he had so greatly failed in this duty, he would not have been so highly commended as an example of faith. But, we say again, that there is not the smallest intimation that the Spirit of God did give any such order to him: nor can we conceive that if, for the trial of his faith, God had given it, he would have ever suffered it to be carried into execution; but would rather have interposed to prevent it, as he did in the case of Isaac.

But, as no pious man would have made such a vow, *so, if Jephthah had made it, the law itself had provided a ransom for her*. We have before said, that vows were encouraged under the law; and *persons*, as well as *things*, might be devoted to God. But if either persons, or things, were devoted to him, the law permitted that a valuation should be made of the devoted thing or person, and that the money should be regarded as a ransom for it, or an offering be presented in its stead. If a human being were devoted, the estimation should vary according to the sex and age of the person: but if it were a beast, then the offerer should give in addition one fifth more than the estimated value as the price of its redemption^m. When the enemies of God and their cities or possessions were, *as accursed things*, devoted to destruction, they were not to be redeemed at all: they were accursed of God himself, as the Amalekites and Canaanites were, and were therefore not to be sparedⁿ: and Saul, in sparing Agag, whom *God* had devoted to destruction, sinned as much as if he had murdered one whom God had ordered to be spared^o. Now, if we call to mind how

ⁱ Exod. xx. 13.^k Deut. xii. 31.^l Exod. xxi. 20.^m Lev. xxvii. 2—13.ⁿ Lev. xxvii. 29.^o 1 Sam. xv. 3, 9, 22, 23, 32, 33.

eminently conversant Jephthah was with the history of Israel, so as to be able to refute all the claims of the king of Ammon^p, we can feel no doubt but that he was well acquainted with the law that prescribed the mode in which devoted things were to be redeemed: indeed his vow was evidently founded on the knowledge of that law: for if a dog had met him first, he would never have dared to offer *that* in sacrifice to God: consequently he would never have made his vow so *indefinitely*, if he had not known that the law admitted of an exchange, in case the devoted thing should be improper to be offered.

But supposing that *he* was ignorant of this law, were the high-priest and all the priests in the kingdom ignorant of it? and, when the execution of the vow was postponed for two months, and great lamentation was made all that time throughout the kingdom on account of the vow, was there no person in all Israel who once thought of this law? If but one person had thought of it, would he not have been very glad to mention it? and would not the mention of it have been most acceptable to Jephthah, when it would have put an immediate end to all his mourning and lamentation? Would he not have been glad enough to pay thirty shekels, about 3*l.* 8*s.* 6*d.*, the sum prescribed by the law, to save the life of his daughter? But it may be said, that this was a period of gross darkness; and that idolatry with all its horrid rites prevailed to a great extent^q. To this I answer, that though idolatry had recently prevailed, *this* was a time of singular reformation; for the people had put away the strange gods from among them, and served the Lord^r: and in such a state of mind, considering what obligations they felt to Jephthah, even if they had not thought of this law, they would have interposed to rescue his innocent daughter from destruction; just as the people, at a later period of their history, rescued Jonathan from the hands of Saul, when the sentence, to which his father's oath had doomed him, was just ready to be executed^s.

These arguments, we grant, would have no weight against an express declaration of Holy Writ: but it is no-where said, that such a vow as doomed her to death was ever made. On the contrary we affirm, that *the terms used by Jephthah do not imply any such thing*. The word that is translated *And*, is not unfrequently used in a disjunctive sense, and should be translated *Or*. In many places it *must of necessity* be translated *Or*, and actually is so translated in our Bible^t: and in the margin of our Bibles it is so translated in the very passage before us. Thus translated, the words of Jephthah involve no difficulty: he says, Whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my

^p ver. 12—27. ^q Judg. x. 6. ^r Judg. x. 16. ^s 1 Sam. xiv. 45.

^t See Exod. xxi. 16, 17. Lev. vi. 3, 5. 2 Sam. ii. 19.

house to meet me, shall surely be the Lord's, OR I will offer it up for a burnt-offering;" that is, it shall be consecrated to the Lord; or, if it be fit to be offered in sacrifice to the Lord, (as a lamb or kid would be,) it shall be offered to him as a burnt-offering. It is really strange, that, when so easy and obvious a translation occurs, any one should prefer one so replete with difficulties, as that which has been usually received.

Thus in relation to *the making of the vow*, we have shewn, *that no good man would make such a vow as this is supposed to be; that, if made, the law admitted of an exchange; and that the terms used on the occasion do not imply that she should be put to death.*]

2. The execution of it—

[Observe the language used by all parties on this occasion, and it will manifestly lead to a very different conclusion from that which has been usually adopted.

Observe the language of *his daughter's acquiescence*. There is a delicacy in it which throws considerable light on the subject. In noticing the effect of the vow upon herself, she studiously avoids the mention of it. This, if we understand the vow as subjecting her to a state of perpetual virginity, is what might have been expected from her; but, if she was to be offered in sacrifice to God, there is no reason whatever why so solemn an event should not have been expressed in plainer terms. In requesting a respite of the sentence, which involved in it a seclusion from the world, somewhat like that which has been practised by Nuns in later ages, she does express what in the first instance she had only glanced at; "Let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows." Here she mentions that which constituted the substance of the vow. Had she been consigned to *death*, she would rather have bewailed her *premature death*, and not merely her virginity. If it be thought, that her piety kept her from bemoaning her *death*, and that she bemoaned her virginity merely as a circumstance that seemed to render her death opprobrious; I answer, that the same piety that reconciled her to death, would certainly have reconciled her to the opprobrium of dying in a virgin state; exactly as Isaac was willing to forego his prospects in relation to the promised Seed, when he yielded up himself to be slain in sacrifice to God.

If it be said, that, on a supposition she was doomed only to a state of perpetual virginity, there was no occasion for her having two months given her to bewail her fate, since she would have had her whole life wherein to bewail it; I answer, that, in the apprehension of Jewish women, it was a great calamity to be childless, since they had not the honour of

increasing the number of the Lord's people, or a hope that the Messiah might spring from them: and this was a peculiarly heavy calamity to *her*, because she was the only child of Jephthah^u; and her doom cut her off from all prospect of raising up a seed who should inherit his honours, and follow his example. Therefore it was proper that there should be a public kind of mourning observed, not only in honour of her who thus freely sacrificed all her prospects in life, but in honour of Jephthah also, who in this instance exercised most eminent self-denial, and might be considered as almost dead.

Next observe the language in which is recorded *his performance of his vow*: "Her father did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man." Why is this latter circumstance mentioned, but to shew wherein the accomplishment of the vow consisted? Is it not strange that *this* should be mentioned so often, and her *death* be never once noticed, if indeed she was put to death? But, if she was only doomed to a state of perpetual virginity, the reason of the expression is clear enough.

In addition to all this, observe the language in which *the commemoration of the event* is mentioned: "It was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year." If she was dead, there was scarcely any adequate reason for the daughters of Israel to go four times a year to one particular place to lament her; for they might as well have lamented her at home: but if she was alive, and secluded from company all the rest of the year, there was reason enough why they should visit her then. But the word which we translate *to lament*, is in the margin of the Bible translated *to talk with*: and this assigns the true reason of those stated convocations: her female friends went *to condole with* her on the occasion, and to do her honour. Even the manner in which she is mentioned in this passage seems to bespeak her a *living* person; they went to talk with "the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite." Had she been offered in sacrifice to God, there would probably have been something more descriptive of her character; but, if she was still living, this is the only description of her that we should expect to find.]

But there is yet a third source from whence we may derive arguments in confirmation of this point. We have noticed the vow in reference both to the *making*, and *the execution* of it: let us now proceed to notice,

3. The honour God put upon it—

[In consequence of this vow, "God delivered the Ammonites into the hands" of Jephthah^x. But would God have

^u ver. 34.

^x ver. 32, 33.

sanctioned in this manner a gross act of deliberate murder? Would not this have been the very way to deceive his people, and to make them think that he was pleased with such offerings as the heathen presented unto Moloch? And when in future ages he punished his people for offering human sacrifices, might they not justly have pleaded, that he in this instance had both approved and rewarded them?

Again : St. Paul, in his catalogue of eminent believers, particularly mentions Jephthah, and with an express reference to this event. Jephthah had shewn his faith by looking to God for victory, and by going forth against the Ammonites in an assured dependence upon him, as the protector of Israel, and the rewarder of all that trust in him : and this act of his is a subject of high commendation with God himself. Now I ask, Would this act have been so commended, if it had been ushered in with such an impious vow, and been followed by such a deliberate murder? But if the vow imported only that whatsoever met him first at his return should be consecrated to God, and if, in consequence of that vow, he did with such steady self-denial proceed to the performance of it, then is God's approbation easily accounted for, even whilst we condemn the indefiniteness and rashness with which the vow was made.

It may be objected to this, that no other instance of devoting a person to virginity occurs. It is true : but neither does any other instance of devoting a person to death. The instance of Abraham and Isaac is not at all in point : for there the determination to offer Isaac was not the result of a rash vow, but of a divine command : and God had a right to dispose of Isaac's life in any way he pleased ; but Jephthah had no right whatever over his daughter's life. The right usurped by wicked Saul over his son Jonathan (which however was properly and successfully resisted) will scarcely be brought in justification and support of such a claim.

It may further be objected, that parents had no right to devote a daughter to perpetual virginity. This also may be true^y ; but much less had they any right to devote her unto *death*.

The most specious objection however against our interpretation is, that, supposing he only devoted her to God, there was no reason why she should remain unmarried ; since Samson and Samuel, both of whom were devoted to God from the womb, were both married. But the case is extremely different between a man and a woman : they were at liberty to serve God in any way that they judged to be agreeable to his will ;

^y Some right of this kind however seems to be acknowledged ; 1 Cor. vii. 37, 38.

but she, if she had married, would have been under the control of her husband, who might in a variety of ways have interfered with such a discharge of her duties as the vow implied: and therefore it was necessary that she should remain unmarried, and that she should also be secluded in a great measure from society itself; *that* being the way in which a woman might serve the Lord, as men served him by waiting on him continually in the tabernacle.

As to the objection, that if he had only devoted her in the sense that we maintain, he would not have so deplored her fate, it has no weight; for as she was his only child, all the distress occasioned to her came with double force on him, who was thereby doomed, and by his own folly too, to have his name and posterity cut off from Israel.]

Such, we are persuaded, was the vow that Jephthah made: we proceed,

II. To suggest some instruction from it—

Both the father and the daughter afford us very instructive lessons. We may learn,

1. To avoid the rashness of Jephthah—

[We cannot be wrong in condemning this, since Jephthah himself lamented it. It may be thought that we are in no danger of imitating it: but what do we in rash oaths? do we not tread in the very steps of Jephthah? There is scarcely an office to which we can be introduced, whether civil or religious, that is not entered upon by first taking an oath to fulfil the duties of it. Yet if there be a post of honour or profit to be obtained, how little do men in general think of the oaths by which they are to gain access to it! Would to God that this matter were considered by the legislature; and that penalties were substituted in the place of oaths! Verily “by reason of oaths the land mourneth,” and the consciences of thousands are greatly burthened. I cannot but consider the frequency of oaths, the ease with which they are administered, and the indifference with which they are taken, as among the most crying sins of the nation.

There is another way also in which we follow the steps of Jephthah, namely, by undertaking so lightly the office of sponsors for the children of our friends. The providing of sponsors to supply the place of parents who shall be removed, or disqualified for the instruction of their children in the fear of God, is excellent: but the engaging solemnly before God to perform their office is no light matter. Let any one read the baptismal service, and see what it is that he undertakes; and then let him see what little attention is paid to these vows in general, or, perhaps, what little attention he himself has

paid to them. It will be well if we lay this to heart in future. Peradventure we have, like Jephthah, inconsiderately opened our mouths to the Lord: let us then at least, like Jephthah, proceed to the performance of our vows. The duty we have undertaken may be difficult and self-denying; but if he, after having unintentionally devoted his only daughter to the Lord, would not go back, notwithstanding the sacrifice was so exceeding great, so neither should we hesitate to perform the most difficult of our vows.

But there is yet another way in which we follow the steps of Jephthah. Who has not in a time of sickness, or danger, or trouble, or alarm, determined with himself, that, if he should be delivered, he would devote himself more unto the Lord, and to the pursuit of heavenly things? Look back, all ye who have been restored from sickness, ye who have been delivered from the pangs of childbirth, ye who have seen your friends or relatives cut off by death, ye who have been in a storm at sea, or been alarmed by thunder and lightning; look back, and call to mind the vows that are upon you; and see how Jephthah will rise up in judgment against you for your violation of them.

How this subject applies to *Ministers*, I need not say: but if I were addressing them, methinks the subject would apply with ten-fold force to them, seeing that their vows were all taken with foresight and solemnity, and involve duties more important than pertain to any other situation under heaven.

But, whatever be their office or character, two things I would say to all: first, Be cautious in making vows; and next, Be conscientious in performing them. Inquire into the nature and extent of any engagements before you enter into them: for, as Solomon says, "It is a snare to a man to devour that which is holy, and after vows to make inquiry²." If we have rashly engaged ourselves to do what the law of God positively prohibits, we must recede from our vow, and humble ourselves before God for our temerity. The forty conspirators who swore that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul, and Herod who swore that he would give his daughter whatsoever she should ask of him, had no right to bind themselves to such an extent, and would have sinned less in violating, than they did in keeping, their engagements. But where our vows are practicable, they must be kept, even though the observance of them be attended with great cost and trouble²: and the attempting to set them aside by the plea of inadvertence or of difficulties attending the observance of them, will only deceive our own souls, and bring upon us the heavy displeasure of our God^b. We remember the judgments

² Prov. xx. 25.^a Deut. xxiii. 21—23.^b Eccl. v. 4—6.

which God inflicted upon the whole Jewish nation in the time of David, for Saul's impiety in violating an engagement which had been hastily contracted by Joshua four hundred years before in favour of the Gibeonites^c: and much more will God visit upon us in the eternal world the violation of engagements entered into by ourselves. "Vow then unto the Lord," if ye see it good, "but pay it^d;" and say with David, "I will go into thy house with burnt-offerings; I will pay thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble^e."]

2. To imitate the piety of his daughter—

[Very eminent was her deportment on this occasion. Great was her love of her country, great her love towards her father, great her reverence for an oath, and great her zeal for God. O that there were such a spirit in all the daughters of our land! Assuredly the conduct of this pious female may lead them to consider how much they are bound to consult the judgment of their parents in relation to marriage: for though we do not think that a parent's authority extends to a prohibition of marriage, which is an ordinance instituted by God himself, yet we have no doubt but that it is the duty of children to pay a deference to the judgment of their parents, and never, unless in extreme cases, to form a connexion contrary to their commands.

Need I say however, that when engagements are formed, they are not to be broken? The whole world unites in condemning so base, so iniquitous a conduct, as that of repudiating a person betrothed. But it has been thought by some, that if one who has in his unconverted state formed an engagement, becomes converted, he may then break his engagement, because he is "not to be unequally yoked with an unbeliever." But does religion justify the violation of our vows? God forbid! The very thought is a libel upon God himself. None but the person with whom the engagement is made, can liberate us from our vows. If indeed a woman to whom one was engaged, were to disgrace herself by some gross misconduct, it might be a reason for refusing to continue the engagement with her, because she has ceased to be the person with whom the engagement was formed. So, if an engagement were formed with a person on account of his supposed piety, and he were to cast off all regard for piety, his change of character would warrant a termination of the contract that had been made with him; because the very grounds of the engagement are subverted. But where, for the gratifying of our own inclination, excuses

^c Josh. ix. 19. with 2 Sam. xxi. 1.

^d Ps. lxxvi. 11.

^e Ps. lxvi. 13, 14.

are sought out for receding from an engagement, God himself will be the avenger of the injured party.

There is one point in particular which the conduct of this pious virgin may well impress on the minds of all who belong to the Established Church; I mean, the observance of those vows which were made for us in baptism — — — Of those vows our parents will never have reason to repent; nor can we ever regret that they were made for us. No mournings, no lamentations will ever be excited by our performance of them. The ungodly world indeed may regret that we have renounced its ways and vanities; and Satan may regret that we have cast off his yoke; but all the saints and angels will rejoice; yea, “there is joy among the angels in the presence of God over one sinner that repenteth.” Even God himself will “be glad and make merry with us,” and will “rejoice over us to do us good.” True it is, that such a consecration of ourselves to God is difficult and self-denying; but it is our truest wisdom, and our highest joy. To all of you then I say, “Dedicate yourselves to God by a perpetual covenant not to be forgotten^f ;” yea, “I beseech you by the mercies of God that ye yield yourselves to God *a living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *reasonable service*^g.”]

^f Jer. l. 5.

^g Rom. xii. 1.

CCLXXIII.

MANOAH'S VISION.

Judg. xiii. 22, 23. *And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God. But his wife said unto him, If the Lord were pleased to kill us, he would not have received a burnt-offering and a meat-offering at our hands, neither would he have shewed us all these things, nor would as at this time have told us such things as these.*

AFTER a brief mention of several judges who successively bore sway in Israel, we are led to the contemplation of one, whose birth, as well as life, deserves particular consideration. To his parents a revelation was made respecting him; which revelation, together with the effects of it on their minds, will form the subject of our present discourse.

Let us notice,

I. The revelation made to them—

[The Israelites for their iniquities were brought under the

power of the Philistines, who oppressed them sorely and for a long period. But God of his own grace and mercy raised up unto them a deliverer. Other deliverers had been raised up at once, and at the precise time that the deliverance was to be effected: but, in the present instance, the person who was to be God's instrument of good to the nation, was not even conceived in the womb. He was to be born, as Isaac and Jacob had been, of a mother who was barren; in order that he might more eminently appear to be a special gift of God. "There was a man of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah: and his wife was barren, and bare not. And the Angel of the Lord appeared unto the woman, and told her, that she should conceive and bear a son," who should be devoted as a Nazarite to the Lord, and should in due time become, in part at least, a saviour to his country^a. The law relating to Nazarites required a total abstinence from wine, or strong drink, or from any thing unclean^b — — And as his consecration to this state was to commence from his first formation in the womb, his mother was immediately to observe all that kind of abstinence which was required of the Nazarite himself, and to continue it till the child should be both born and weaned. This occurrence she mentioned to her husband, together with the charge given to herself respecting the abstinence that was required^c. Manoah, being strong in faith, entertained no doubt respecting the accomplishment of the Angel's words: but being desirous that the mercy intended to the nation should not be obstructed by any error or neglect on his part, he besought the Lord, that the same person should be sent to them again, to teach them more fully whatever was necessary for them to know, or do, respecting the child. *The visit was repeated*, according to his desire; and *the testimony was confirmed* by a visible display of the divine power. Manoah, not knowing who this angel was, whether he was only a man, or an angel in human shape, or whether he was not the Angel of the Covenant, even the Son of God himself in human shape, requested permission to set before him a banquet, or an offering, as might be most suited to his character: but when he had presented an offering, fire, probably from the rock or from heaven, consumed the sacrifice; and the Angel ascended in the flame to heaven; and thereby testified the acceptance both of their persons and their sacrifice.]

Let us now notice,

II. The effect produced upon them—

Great was the faith both of Manoah and his wife: but she, being the more eminent of the two,

^a ver. 2—5.

^b Numb. vi. 2—8.

^c ver. 6, 7.

experienced a very different effect. The revelation produced,

1. In Manoah, fear—

[He now perceived and knew, that the person who had announced these tidings to him was God, in human shape: and therefore he conceived that both he and his wife must die. This idea was not without some foundation; for, when Moses had entreated the Lord to shew him his glory, the Lord said to him, “Thou canst not see my face; for there shall no man see me and live:” and for this very reason God put him into a clift of a rock, and permitted him to see, as it were, only “his back parts^d.” And, when Jacob had been favoured with a visit from the same divine person in the shape of an angel, he expressed his astonishment that “his life was preserved^e.” Indeed, when only an angel has appeared to some of the most distinguished servants of the Almighty, they have been so agitated, as scarcely to retain possession of their minds^f. We wonder not therefore at his apprehensions; but we the more admire the composure of his wife.]

2. In his wife, confidence—

[She argued in a very different way. She considered the mercies already vouchsafed to them as tokens for good: for why should God confer such singular honour upon them, if he intended to kill them? Why did he accept at their hands the burnt-offering? Why did he stoop to give them such information? Why give them such gracious promises? Was all this done to mock them? Indeed, if he should kill them, how could the promises be fulfilled? or for what purpose were they given? This was a just mode of arguing; for such mercies were both evidences, and pledges, of his love: and therefore were rather to be considered as earnestness of future blessings, than as harbingers of ill. This was precisely the view which Paul entertained of the mercies conferred on him by God, “who,” says he, “delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us^g.” and it is the true light in which every instance of his goodness should be considered.]

Let us LEARN then from hence,

1. To guard against low and unworthy thoughts of God—

[It is really no uncommon thought, even among good people, that their blessings are too great to be of any long

^d Exod. xxxiii. 20—23.

^e Gen. xxxii. 29, 30.

^f Judg. vi. 22. Rev. xix. 10.

^g 2 Cor. i. 10.

duration. This sentiment does not arise from a view of the instability of human affairs, but from an apprehension that a continuance of their blessings is too great a thing to expect even from God himself, and that his grace, though rich, is not sufficiently extensive for such a gift. But how dishonourable is this to God! and what an unworthy return for all his goodness to us! Why should we entertain such a suspicion? why should we harbour such ungenerous thoughts? why should we so limit his glorious perfections? Let such apprehensions be checked in their very first rise; and let us remember that his disposition to give exceeds our utmost capacity to receive^h.]

2. To make a just improvement of the mercies he bestows upon us—

[We shall do well to magnify the grace of God in our thoughts, and to inculcate upon others the same heavenly disposition. See how David argued, on a review of his past mercies; “Thou hast delivered my soul from death: wilt thou not deliver my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the livingⁱ?” And, when under peculiar temptation he was led to doubt the continuance of God’s goodness to him, he checked himself, by calling to mind the marvellous mercies that had already been vouchsafed unto him^k.

Nor is it for the comfort only of the person himself that God imparts these glorious hopes, but for the encouragement of others also: and this was the improvement which St. Paul made of his own happy experience^l. Only let it be recollected what God has done for us, in giving up his Son to the accursed death of the cross; and can we then limit his tender mercies? can we doubt his willingness to give us any thing else^m? Whether therefore it be for the comfort of our own minds, or for the encouragement of others, this is the thought which we should ever bear in remembrance, and enlarge our own expectations from God in proportion as he multiplies his benefits to us: we should look on all present blessings as the first-fruits that precede the harvest, or as the drop before the shower.]

^h Eph. iii. 20.

ⁱ Ps. lvi. 13.

^k Ps. lxxvii. 7—11.

^l 2 Cor. i. 3, 4.

^m Rom. viii. 32.

CCLXXIV.

SAMSON’S RIDDLE.

Judg. xiv. 12—14. *And Samson said unto them, I will now put forth a riddle unto you: if ye can certainly declare it me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty sheets and thirty change of garments: but if ye cannot declare it me, then shall ye give me thirty sheets,*

and thirty change of garments. And they said unto him, Put forth thy riddle, that we may hear it. And he said unto them, Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.

OF all the Judges that were in Israel, there was not one who committed so many faults, or by whom God wrought so many miracles, as Samson. His character is dark and inexplicable; insomuch that, if he had not been celebrated in the New Testament as an eminent Believer, we might reasonably have doubted whether he was possessed of any true piety. It must be recollected however, that his history is very short, and that the peculiarity of the dispensation under which he lived may account for many things, which, if done at this time and without the special appointment of Heaven, would be highly criminal. Besides, there might be in him many exercises of true piety, which, if they had been recorded, would have reflected a different light upon his character. The circumstances of his birth we have noticed: those of his marriage are next to be considered.

We cannot approve his conduct in connecting himself with a Philistine woman, though we commend it highly in not forming that connexion without having first obtained the consent of his parents. It should seem as if his choice was sanctioned by God, because we are told, that "*it was of the Lord* that he sought an occasion against the Philistines^a." But this circumstance does not necessarily make the action good: it may be that God only overruled the evil propensities of Samson, to accomplish his own purposes against the oppressors of his people^b. However, in going down with his parents to Timnath, where the woman lived, he turned aside from them into a vineyard, and, when separated from them, was attacked by a young lion; whom, though unarmed, he rent, as easily as he would have rent a kid^c. This he did through the mighty power of God: yet though the exploit was so astonishing, he

^a ver. 4.^b See Josh. xi. 20. 1 Kings xii. 15.^c ver. 6.

concealed it utterly from his parents, and proceeded with them as though nothing particular had happened unto him^d. What a rare instance of modesty was this! How few people are there in the world, who, if they had performed such an act, could have suffered it to remain hid from their dearest friends!

Having obtained the consent of the woman, he returned home, and, after a time, went to Timnath with his parents again, in order to take her for his wife and complete the nuptials. In his way, he turned aside again, to view the lion, whom he had slain. His intention probably was, to revive in his soul a sense of the divine goodness to him, in having vouchsafed him so signal a deliverance: but behold, to his utter astonishment, he found a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion^e. Upon this he took of the honey, and ate it, and gave it to his parents; but still concealed the miracle which had been wrought in his favour.

Every thing being prepared for the nuptials, he, according to the custom of the country, made a feast of seven days' continuance, at which thirty young men of the Philistines attended as his friends and companions. On this occasion he proposed to them a riddle, which will be profitable for our present consideration.

We will consider it,

I. As proposed on that occasion—

In the proposing of it we see no evil whatever—

[There was nothing improper in the riddle itself; it had nothing of an unbecoming nature couched under it; and it served as a trial of their ingenuity, and as an occasion of innocent mirth. Indeed its ultimate design was good, inasmuch as it would of necessity lead to a disclosure of the miracle that had been wrought, and consequently to a display of the power and goodness of Israel's God.]

But the manner of proposing it was replete with evil—

[A wager was laid with all the thirty companions respecting it: and that wager was in itself evil, as being both the root

^d ver. 6.

^e ver. 8, 9.

and fruit of covetousness. But, if any one be disposed to deny that the laying of wagers is evil in *its nature*, no one, after reading this history, can doubt whether it be evil in *its tendency*. After three days' fruitless inquiry, the pride of these thirty companions was greatly mortified, and their covetousness excited to a most fearful degree. Not being able to bear the thought of losing their wager, they were filled with indignation, and threatened to burn the bride, together with her father's house, if she did not get the secret from her husband, and reveal it unto them. She, partly through fear, and partly from a partiality for them, laboured incessantly to gain from her husband the solution of the riddle. With this view, she wept before him during the remaining days of the feast, pretending that his reserve was a proof of his want of affection for her: and at last, having quite wearied him with her importunity, she obtained from him the secret, and then revealed it to them, and enabled them to gain the wager. He might justly have disputed the point with them, because they did not find out the riddle themselves, but obtained the knowledge of it by treachery. But, though he told them, "If ye had not plowed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle," yet he determined to pay the wager. But what a terrible resolution did he adopt! He determined to kill thirty men of the Philistines, and with their garments to pay the wager that he had lost. It is said indeed that "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he went down to Askelon and slew them:" nor can we presume to question for a moment the justice of God in inflicting such judgments on the enemies of his people: He may take them off *when* he will, and *by whom* he will. But viewing the action by itself, we see in it altogether a most dreadful exhibition of the EFFECTS OF GAMING: in his friends, pride, covetousness, wrath, cruelty, and a confederacy to gain by fraud what they could not obtain in any other way: in his wife, hypocrisy, deceit, and treachery: in Samson, revenge, robbery, and murder. Perhaps in the annals of the whole world we shall not find a more striking display of the manner in which DEBTS OF HONOUR, as they are called, are contracted, acknowledged, and discharged. They are contracted at friendly and convivial meetings; they are acknowledged as of greater obligation than all the common duties of justice and charity; and the peace of whole families, that were wholly unconnected with the transactions, is invaded, yea, many are reduced to poverty, to prison, and to death, in order to discharge the debts contracted by the cast of a die, or by the turning up of a card. I may go further still, and say, that of all the sources of SUICIDE, this is by far the most fruitful. As to the endearments of friendship, or the sweets of conjugal affection, GAMING almost invariably produces the same result as in Samson's case,

who left the place in disgust, deserted his treacherous wife, and had the mortification to find her afterwards in the embraces of one, who had just before professed himself his greatest friend.

Would to God that every gambler in the universe would duly consider this history !]

We will now proceed to consider the riddle,

II. As applicable to other subjects—

We mean not to assert that it was *intended* to be applied to other subjects; though, considering the nature of that dispensation, and the peculiar circumstances of his history, it seems highly probable that every thing related of him had either a typical aspect or a mysterious import. We wish, however, always to lean to the safer side, and to suggest only in an *accommodated* sense any observations, which would admit of doubt, if applied to the Scripture as expressive of its *real* import.

With this caution we think the riddle may be applied,

1. To the Lord Jesus Christ himself—

[We know that he came down from the bosom of his Father, assumed our nature, sojourned many years upon the earth, and was at last put to death, even the accursed death of the cross. Now what good could we expect to result from this? Must we not rather suppose that the greatest possible evil must accrue from it, even the more aggravated condemnation of the whole world? Yet behold, “out of the eater came forth meat;” out of that, which we should have imagined would prove the destruction of the whole human race, has proceeded the salvation of ruined man! In this light was this mystery announced to Adam in Paradise; “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel^f.” Here the very wounds which Satan should inflict on the Lord Jesus, are spoken of as the means of effecting *his own* destruction. Isaiah speaks to the same effect, that the Messiah, by making his own soul an offering for sin, should secure to himself a seed who should live for ever^g. In the New Testament, the same mysterious representations are given us of Christ: “He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, that he might condemn sin in the flesh^h;” and “that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver those who through

^f Gen. iii. 15.

^g Isai. liii. 10, 12.

^h Rom. viii. 3.

fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondageⁱ — — — Amazing! that his death should be our life; his sufferings, our happiness; his humiliation, our glory! Yet so it is; for when he appeared to have been utterly vanquished, he rescued us from the hand of his great adversary, and spoiled all the principalities and powers of hell, and triumphed over them openly on his cross.”]

2. To every member of his mystical body—

[Great and multiplied are the trials of the Lord's people; yet the very billows that threaten to overwhelm them, bear them forward to their desired haven. View the trials which they have in common with the rest of mankind; these are sent them by God for their good^k, to improve their graces^l, and eventually to augment the eternal weight of glory that shall be given them at their departure hence^m — — — View the trials which they meet with on account of their Christian profession; these are rather a ground of joy than of sorrowⁿ, and are occasions of holy glorying, inasmuch as they are the means of bringing to us much richer communications of divine aid^o, and of advancing that very cause which they are intended to repress^p.

Whether therefore the riddle was intended to comprehend these things or not, sure we are that it was not more applicable to the occasion on which it was used, than it is to the trials and deliverances of the Lord's people. But, in order to unravel this mystery, we must plough with the Lord's heifer, and seek the teachings of his Spirit^q.]

Two words of ADVICE I would suggest as arising out of this subject—

1. Be frequent in reviewing the mercies of your God—

[There is no one who has not met with mercies and deliverances, on account of which he has reason to bless his God. And if we took frequent occasions of reviewing these mercies, what sweetness might we not extract from them; and that not for our own refreshment only, but for the comfort and refreshment of all connected with us! Though, as must frequently be the case, there may be things in our private experience which we cannot communicate even to our dearest friends, yet it would be impossible but that they must derive benefit from converse with us, after we ourselves have extracted the honey

ⁱ Heb. ii. 14, 15. See also 2 Cor. v. 21. and viii. 9. and 1 Pet. ii. 24.

^k Heb. xii. 10, 11.

^l Rom. v. 3—5.

^m 2 Cor. iv. 17.

ⁿ Matt. v. 10—12.

^o 2 Cor. xii. 9, 10.

^p Phil. i. 12.

^q 1 Cor. ii. 11. Matt. xiii. 11.

which God's dispensations towards us are calculated to afford. Let us then frequently turn aside even from our dearest friends, or in the midst of the most important business, to contemplate the mercies we have received; and we shall often be surprised at the rich stores of wisdom and consolation which we shall derive from them.]

2. Be not hasty to complain of his judgments—

[The troubles which we may be called to endure, may appear insupportable; and we may be ready to say, like Jacob, "All these things are against me." But, if we wait, we shall find, that they are all working for our good; and that though "clouds and darkness may be round about the Lord, righteousness and judgment are the basis of his throne." How many thousands after a time have been constrained to say with David, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted!" Know ye, Beloved, that there is no trial so heavy, but, if you acknowledge God in it, it shall yield you a rich supply of heavenly consolations. The most striking illustration of this truth will be found in Jehoshaphat's victory over three confederate armies: he was no less than three days in gathering the spoil^r — — — Even that last of enemies, death itself, however formidable he may appear, shall yield sweets to the believing soul: the conflict with him may be severe; but the triumph over him shall be complete, and the fruits of victory eternal.]

^r 2 Chron. xx. 2, 25.

CCLXXV.

SAMSON'S CHARACTER AND END.

Judg. xvi. 28. *And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.*

SCARCELY any part of Scripture has afforded more occasion for the doubts of sceptics or the scoffs of infidels, than the history of Samson. True it is, that many strange things are contained in it; but there is nothing in it which may not easily be accounted for by those who consider the nature of that dispensation, and the power of the God of Israel. The doctrine of the Resurrection appeared to many incredible: but our Lord said to them, "Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of

God." The same reply we would make to any persons who would question the facts contained in this history. Samson was raised up by God on purpose to chastise the oppressors of Israel: and he was strengthened by God to effect that by his own arm, which seemed to require the united exertions of the whole nation. The circumstance of his being recorded as a man of faith and piety, gives a great additional interest to his history; because it is difficult to conceive how such inconsistencies should be combined in one person. We must not however attempt to cloke his impieties, because he was a saint; nor must we contradict an inspired Apostle, because he was a sinner: we should rather examine the different parts of his conduct, that so we may form a just estimate of his character: and we shall find our labour well repaid by many instructive lessons which his history will afford us.

Let us then consider,

I. His character—

It must be confessed that there was in him much amiss. He appears to have been too much actuated by,

1. A vindictive spirit—

[He knew indeed the peculiar commission given him: but yet in executing that commission he seems to have been influenced more by personal considerations than by true patriotism. His first slaughter of thirty Philistines was an act of revenge for the treachery which he had experienced at his bridal-feast, both from the bride herself, and all his pretended friends. When he returned afterwards to be reconciled to his wife, and found her given by her own father to another man, he executed the strange device of tying three hundred foxes together, two and two, by their tails, with a fire-brand or torch between each couple, and sending them in among the ripe corn, and the sheaves already cut, as also among the vines and olives; by which he devastated a great extent of country^a. And, notwithstanding the Philistines themselves, on hearing of the

^a This was not so impracticable a thing as we are ready to imagine: for the foxes in that country were very numerous; Cant. ii. 15. Ezek. xiii. 4. And Samson, being the chief governor of the Jewish nation, would have many at hand to execute his commands.

reason of this conduct, avenged him on his wife and father-in-law by burning them to death, yet was he bent on further vengeance, and "slew the Philistines, hip and thigh, with a great slaughter."

After this we do not wonder that the Philistines sought to take him: we only wonder that his own countrymen did not embrace this opportunity of uniting with him to shake off the yoke of their oppressors. The tribe of Judah, amongst whom Samson had taken refuge, were only alarmed for their own safety; and, to screen themselves, engaged to apprehend him, and deliver him up to the Philistines. On their swearing not to destroy him themselves, Samson surrendered up himself to them; and suffered them to bind him with two new cords. The Philistines seeing him brought to them a prisoner, exulted greatly, and shouted aloud for joy: but their joy was soon turned into sorrow: for Samson burst the cords asunder, as easily as flax is consumed by fire; and, with the jaw-bone of an ass, which he found near him, he slew no less than a thousand men.

Now we do not mean to ascribe the whole of this to mere revenge; for we doubt not but that he was moved to it by the Spirit of God: but as Jehu afterwards was actuated by pride even whilst in other respects he was under a divine impulse, so was Samson too much under the influence of a vindictive spirit, whilst in other respects he was executing the designs of Heaven.]

2. A vain-glorious spirit—

[On this last occasion, when God had vouchsafed to him so great a deliverance, we should have expected that he would have been forward to give God the glory: but behold, he took all the honour to himself: "With the jaw-bone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw-bone of an ass have I slain a thousand men^b." How lamentable, that at such a time he should forget by whom this miracle had been wrought, and should so provoke to jealousy his heavenly Benefactor! This, it is true, is but too common: but how evil it is in the sight of God, we may see in the judgment inflicted for it on a heathen prince; who, when applauded for his eloquence, omitted to give the glory unto God: he was smitten with a mortal disease, and "eaten up of worms^c."]

3. A spirit of lewdness and incontinence—

[Here was his great failing. His first connexion in marriage was imprudent, but not sinful: but when that tie was dissolved by the death of his wife, he seems to have entertained no more thoughts of an honourable connexion, but

^b Judg. xv. 16.

^c Acts xii. 22, 23.

addicted himself to an unlawful commerce with harlots. On one occasion, for the gratification of his sinful appetites, he put himself in the power of his Philistine enemies, and would have fallen a sacrifice to their rage, if he had not, beyond all reasonable expectation, risen at midnight from the harlot's bed, and, by supernatural strength, borne away the gates of the city which had been barred against him^d. At another time he became enamoured of a woman, called Delilah: and the violence of his attachment to her was ere long the occasion of his death. Bribed by the Philistines, she sought to obtain from him information respecting the source of his great strength. He to amuse her, and to avoid a disclosure of so important a secret, told her various things, and submitted to various experiments; all of which issued in wonderful displays of his strength. But at last, "wearied to death" by her incessant importunity, he madly confided to her the secret, 'That his strength would vanish if only his locks were cut, since they were the badge of his Nazariteship, and the token or seal of his consecration to God: that seal once broken, the blessings which God had conferred upon him as a Nazarite would be forfeited and lost.' She now saw that she had gained her point, and prepared every thing for his destruction. But would not one have thought that after such a disclosure he would have taken care not to put himself in her power? Yet behold, he soon afterwards fell asleep with his head in her lap; and afforded her an opportunity of employing a man to cut off his hair. This being done, she woke him, as on former occasions; and he, unconscious that the Lord had departed from him, went forth to shake himself as at other times. But now his strength was gone; and the Philistines seized him and put out his eyes, and bound him with fetters of brass, and made him grind in a prison. What an awful example is here of the miseries consequent upon unbridled lust! The infatuation it produces is beyond all conception. Verily the fetters of brass did not form a stronger bond for his feet, than ungoverned passions make for the souls of men. Even reason and common sense often appear to fail the persons who are under their influence; insomuch that, with temporal and eternal ruin before their eyes, they rush on, till they bring upon themselves the miseries which they would not shun.]

How in the midst of all this wickedness can he be deemed a saint?

[We must make great allowance for the dispensation under which he lived, and the peculiar darkness of his times. But God forbid that we should vindicate such conduct as his! We

apprehend that we must look for his piety rather in his latter days than at any time previous to his confinement at Gaza. Certainly his early days were marked with a pious submission to his parents: and it is probable, that, in his wonderful exertions, there was more of affiance in God, and a regard for Israel's welfare, than appears upon the face of the history. Moreover, when God rebuked his pride by suffering him to be in danger of perishing through thirst, he betook himself to prayer, and obtained a miraculous supply of water from God, by a well opened, *not in the jaw-bone*, as the translation imports, but *in Lehi*, as the marginal rendering more justly intimates^e; the place being by anticipation called *Lehi*, in reference to this feat wrought by *the jaw-bone*.]

But in our text we see the greatest proof of his piety; as will more fully appear, whilst we consider,

II. His end—

[Like Manasseh, this ill-fated Judge humbled himself in his affliction, and sought the Lord. Of this there is abundant evidence in his prayer. We grant that even here there seems to be a remnant of that vindictive spirit which we have before noticed: but we are willing to hope, that it was the cause of God and of Israel that he desired to avenge, rather than his own. The compliance of God with his request seems to warrant this conjecture. Indeed God's honour, if we may so speak, required such a signal act of vengeance to be inflicted on his enemies. The Philistines had assembled in a spacious edifice, to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon, their idol-god. To him they ascribed praise and honour, as having triumphed over the God of Israel. Thousands of their chief men and women were assembled in the place, and three thousand others on the roof; and Samson was brought forth, to be made an object of profane mirth and triumph. Then it was that Samson offered this prayer, and willingly devoted himself to death, that he might be an instrument of God's vengeance on them. The place was supported by two contiguous pillars: and God enabled him, by a wonderful exertion of strength, to pull down the pillars in an instant, and thus to overwhelm at once the whole assembly. He fell indeed himself in the common ruin: but in his death he reminds us of that adorable Saviour, who "triumphed over principalities and powers upon the cross," and "*by death* overcame him that had the power of death, and delivered those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."

Here we cannot but contemplate the benefit of affliction. At Lehi, it was rendered serviceable to humble his pride; and

^e "En-hak-kore" means, *The well of him that cried*: and it continued in *Lehi* for many years. Judg. xv. 19.

at Gaza it brought him fully to repentance. We are ready to pity the degraded Judge of Israel when we see him reduced to such a state of misery by his enemies: but, if we pity the *man*, we congratulate the *sinner*; to whose final salvation these heavy trials were made subservient: and we congratulate all, whatever their afflictions be, who find them overruled for so great a good.]

This subject may well be IMPROVED,

1. For warning—

[How painful is it to see a person, who had been consecrated to God from his first conception in the womb, and who had given early hopes of fulfilling the desires of his parents and the designs of God, abandoning himself to the lawless indulgence of his appetites and passions! Yet thus it is with many, whose parents have watched over them with the tenderest care, and prayed for them with the most pious solicitude^f — — — O that those who think lightly of such sins would ponder the cautions given them by Solomon^g — — — and learn betimes to “abstain from fleshly lusts, which *war against the soul!*”]

2. For encouragement—

[Great as was the sin of Samson, and justly as he merited the judgments which he brought upon himself, he found mercy of the Lord at last: and sure we are, that every penitent, whatever his crimes may have been, shall obtain mercy, if only he flee for refuge to that Saviour whose “blood cleanseth from all sin.” We mean not by this observation to encourage any in the indulgence of sin, from a hope that they shall at last repent of it and be saved: for how do they know that they shall live to repent, or that, if their lives be prolonged, repentance will be given them? But, if any are desirous of humbling themselves for sin before God, let them not despair of mercy: let them rather expect, that God, who delighteth in mercy, will be gracious unto them; that he will refresh their weary souls in their deepest extremity^h; and that, before he take them hence, he will give them victory over all their spiritual enemies; so that with their dying breath they shall sing, “Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”]

^f Prov. v. 22. ^g Prov. v. 1—13. and vi. 25—28. and vii. 6—27.

^h Isai. xli. 17, 18.

CCLXXVI.

MICAH'S FALSE CONFIDENCE.

Judg. xvii. 13. *Then said Micah, Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest.**

IN the history before us we see the commencement of that defection to idolatry, which at no distant period prevailed throughout all the tribes of Israel. The account in point of time precedes the reign of the Judges; for it occurred whilst Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, was the high-priest, and consequently soon after the death of Joshua^a. And, as being the first step of Israel's departure from God, it is related more circumstantially than its intrinsic importance seems otherwise to have deserved.

Micah was of the tribe of Ephraim. He had stolen from his mother a large sum of money which she had amassed: but from a dread of the curses which she had imprecated on the head of the guilty person, he had confessed his crime, and restored the money. She, pleased with the repentance of her son, would have given him the money: but he persisting in the refusal of it, she gave two hundred shekels of silver out of the eleven hundred which she had recovered, to form a graven image and a molten image; which she gave to her son, that he might have them to consult on all occasions. He on his part appropriated to them an apartment of his house for a temple, and consecrated his son to be a priest, to officiate before them with an ephod, which was made for his use^b. But a Levite, who wanted employment, coming that way, Micah engaged him to minister before the idols; and concluded, that now he could not fail of being happy, since he had a duly authorized person for his priest.

Just at that time the Danites, who had not yet gained possession of all the land that had been assigned them, determined to go up to Laish, and seize it for their inheritance. But previous to their attack upon the inhabitants, they sent forth spies to search out the state of the people, in order that they might the better judge what force to send against them, and what prospect there was of ultimate success. These spies coming to Mount Ephraim, where Micah lived, desired him to consult God through the medium

^a Judg. xx. 28.

^b ver. 2—5.

of his idols; and received from him an encouraging reply. The report of the spies being favourable, six hundred Danites went forth upon the expedition; and coming to the house of Micah in their way, robbed him of his idols, and bribed his priest to accompany them, and to minister to them, as he had done to Micah. After they had succeeded in destroying the inhabitants of Laish, and in taking possession of their land, they set up these idols for their gods, and thus established idolatry, which in process of time spread over the whole land.

But it is not of idolatry in general that we propose to speak, but only of that particular modification of it which Micah established, and of the confidence which he expressed, when his newly-invented religion was made to bear some faint resemblance to the Mosaic ritual. This so exactly represents the false confidences to which ungodly men of every age resort, that we shall find it a very profitable subject for our present consideration.

We take occasion then from our text to notice,

I. The false confidences of ungodly men—

The worship established by Micah was a mixture of heathenism and of the Jewish ritual: it was heathenism, as far as it had respect to idols; and it was Judaism, as far as the use of an ephod and the ministration of a Levite were concerned. But, faint as its resemblance was to any thing authorized by God, it was sufficient in Micah's judgment to justify a most assured confidence in the divine favour.

Somewhat of a similar mixture is the religion of the generality in the present day—

[It is a combination of *Heathenism*, and *Judaism*, and *Christianity*. It is in part *Heathenism*. What are the views which men in general have of God, but such as were entertained by the heathen philosophers? We have, it is true, clearer views of the unity of God: but of his perfections we have scarcely juster apprehensions than the heathen had. Christians in general account of God as a Being who is but little interested about the affairs of this world, either in a way of present control, or of future retribution. All, in their

apprehension, is left either to chance, or to the will of man: and, provided only some of the more heinous sins be not committed by us, the state of our minds and the habits of our lives will pass altogether unnoticed by him. To see the hand of God in every thing; to expect from him the blessings which we ask at his hands; to be sensible of his favour or displeasure; to regard him as pledged to order all things for his people's good; and to rest assured, that he will fulfil to us his promises; is, in the estimation of the world at large, no better than presumptuous pride and enthusiastic folly: so entirely do they exclude Jehovah from the government of the world, and reduce him to the state of the god of Epicurus. In like manner the morality of men in general is simply that of the wiser heathens; the more refined and exalted requirements of Christianity being deemed unnecessarily precise, and absurdly strict. An entire deadness to the world, and devotedness to God, are never contemplated by them, but as the dictates of ascetic gloom or fanatical conceit.

Whilst in their principles they sink into heathenism, in their adherence to forms they trench on *Judaism*. Every sect has its favourite forms, which, though of human origin only, are of more weight in the estimation of the generality than either principles or morals. A man may be sceptical in his principles, and licentious in his morals, and yet offend no one: but let him violate the forms which have been established by his own particular sect or party, and he will raise an outcry against him immediately. This is common both with Papists and Protestants, yes, and with Protestants of every description. The rules of their own particular denomination are more to them than the oracles of truth; and a neglect or violation of a human institution is more heinous in their eyes than any departure from the commands of God. Thus it was with the Pharisees of old, who made void the law of God, and regarded only their own self-appointed usages: and thus it is at this day amongst multitudes who name the name of Christ.

A small portion of Christianity is for the most part added to this, to complete the system. Christ is acknowledged to have purchased for us such a relaxation of the divine law as we are pleased to claim, and a power to save ourselves by any measure of obedience which we choose to pay to the code we have devised — — —]

Whilst such is the religion of the generality, it is supposed to constitute a just ground of confidence before God—

[Micah had now no doubts or fears but that all would go well with him both in this world and the next. And similar to this is the confidence which almost universally obtains amongst

ungodly men. They have no fears but that God will do them good, because they are free from those crimes which outrage the common feelings of mankind, and serve God according to such rules as they have laid down for themselves. Whosoever dies in such a state, they send to heaven, as a matter of course; thinking, that to entertain a doubt of their safety would be the height of uncharitableness. It is surprising to what an extent their confidence is carried. The bare possibility of such persons having perished in their sins is never once contemplated by them: and, if a doubt were expressed respecting the issue of their own expectations, they would be quite indignant. Were a truly pious man to express the same confidence as arising from the promises of God, they would inveigh against his presumption: but in their own delusive speculations their confidence is such as to preclude all doubt. We may see this exemplified in the Jews of old. To have Abraham for their father, and the temple of the Lord for their religious services, was in their estimation sufficient ground of hope, though they lived in a constant violation of every known duty^c. And precisely thus it is with the generality of Christians: they have been baptized into the faith of Christ, and they have lived according to a system which the world approves; and therefore they can say without fear, "I know that the Lord will do me good."]

But whilst ungodly men are buoying themselves up with such delusive hopes, let us contemplate,

II. Their bitter disappointments—

What was the issue of Micah's confidence? Was it justified by facts? Could his idols help him in the day of adversity? or did Jehovah interpose for his support? No: his idols could not even protect themselves: and when he complained of the spoilers who had robbed him, his pathetic expostulations were of no avail; and he was constrained to submit in silence to the loss of all wherein he had put his trust. Hear to what straits he was reduced: "Ye have taken away my gods; and what have I more^d?" And thus will it be with the ungodly in the last day.

Their "refuges of lies" will be swept away—

[The religion in which they now so confidently trust, will be proved a baseless fabric. No foundation will then stand, but that which God himself has laid: nor will any super-

^c Matt. iii. 9. Jer. vii. 4. Isai. xlvi. 1, 2. ^d Judg. xviii. 24.

structure endure, but that which is able to abide the fiery test which shall be applied to it^e. The law, which sinners reduce to their own standard, will be found immutable: the obedience which they pay to it will be found so imperfect, as to be incapable of affording the smallest ground of justification before God. The Lord Jesus Christ will then be seen to have been the only Saviour of sinful men; and his obedience unto death the only hope of a ruined world. The religion of the Bible will then appear to be, what it really is, the only means of a sinner's access to God, and acceptance with him.]

Their destitution and misery will be then complete—

["Ye have taken away my gods; and what have I left?" may then be considered as the bitter lamentation of every self-deceived soul. How gladly would they who were once so confident in their expectations of bliss, take refuge, if it were possible, under rocks and mountains! How thankfully would they accept of utter annihilation, instead of a protracted existence under the wrath of God! In vain are now their pleas, "I thought that I was right." Why did they rest in vain conjectures? Why did they presume to substitute a system of their own in the place of that which God had revealed? Why would they not submit to be saved in God's own way? Why would they venture the salvation of their souls on plans and systems of their own devising? Alas! it is now too late to rectify their error: they are gone beyond redemption; and are consigned to those regions of darkness and despair, where not a single ray of hope can ever enter to dispel their gloom. "They have walked in the light of the sparks which they themselves have kindled: and now they lie down in sorrowⁱ."

Thus it will be, whatever men may now say to the contrary^g; and, if they will not believe, they shall soon "see whose word shall stand, God's or theirs^h."

SEE then from hence,

1. The importance of having right sentiments in religion—

[If we consider religion only as influencing the mind in this present life, it is no unimportant matter whether we have such a vain system as men form for themselves, or such a grand and glorious system as God has revealed in his word. Compare that of Micah with that of Daniel and the Hebrew Youths, and say, which of the two was the more effectual in the hour of trial? — — — But extend your views to the eternal

^e 1 Cor. iii. 11—13.

^g Job xv. 31.

^f Isai. l. 11.

^h Jer. xlv. 28.

world; and compare the states of the Pharisee and the Publican, or of the martyred Stephen and his self-applauding murderers; and then say, what principles are most salutary, and, what practice is most conducive to our true happiness. Away with all the systems then of man's device; and embrace with your whole hearts "the glorious Gospel of the blessed God."

2. The comfort of having the Lord for our God—

[Who can ever rob us of that? Who can take our God from us? or what can we want, if we have him for our friend? We may be spoiled of all else; but still we shall be rich. With his favour secured to us, and his love shed abroad in our hearts, we shall be truly happy; like Paul, "having nothing, and yet possessing all things." Seek ye then to have the Lord Jesus Christ abiding with you. Seek to have him for your sacrifice; him for your altar; "him for your Priest;" and you may then be as confident of the divine favour as your hearts can wish. You may then safely adopt the language of Micah, and say, "I know that the Lord will do me good." God's favour is then made over to you by an everlasting covenant: it is confirmed to you by promise and by oath, "by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie." So that from henceforth you "may have strong consolation, if only you flee for refuge, to lay hold on the hope that is set before you¹." Then you may look forward also to the day of judgment with assured confidence, that he who has witnessed the desires of your heart, will acknowledge you as his, and "claim you as his own when he shall make up his jewels^k." Then shall it be seen, beyond all contradiction, who was right; the self-confident framer of a human system, or the humble follower of the Lamb: for "then shall all discern between the righteous and the wicked; between him who served God, and him who served him not^l."]

¹ Heb. vi. 17—19.

^k Mal. iii. 16, 17.

^l Mal. iii. 18.

CCLXXVII.

THE BENJAMITES' WICKEDNESS.

Judg. xxi. 25. *In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*

SUCH is the depravity of human nature, that man is always prone to depart from God; and departures once begun, extend rapidly through individuals, communities, and kingdoms: the departure of a few righteous persons, like the removal of a dam,

soon opens a way for iniquity to inundate a whole country. During the life of Joshua and his coadjutors in the government, the Israelites retained a good measure of piety: but no sooner were they called to their eternal rest, than impiety began to deluge the land. The transactions recorded respecting the Danites in the 17th and 18th chapters, and of the Benjamites in the three last chapters, though placed after the history of the Judges, all took place whilst Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, was high-priest; and consequently, very soon after the death of Joshua, and before any Judge in Israel had been raised up^a: and it is repeatedly noticed in all those chapters, that these overflowings of ungodliness were occasioned by the want of those salutary restraints, which a wise and righteous governor would have imposed upon the people. This is particularly specified in our text; from whence we are very forcibly led to shew,

I. The obligations we owe to Civil Government—

Where there is no government, all manner of iniquities will prevail—

[This is most remarkably illustrated in the history before us. The idolatry of the Danites is ascribed to that^b. The ease with which the inhabitants of Laish fell a prey to a small handful of invaders, was owing to the dissoluteness of its inhabitants, and a total want of magistrates to enforce some salutary laws^c. The whole account also of the Levite and his concubine, as connected with the horrid wickedness of the Benjamites, and the extensive miseries consequent upon it, are all referred to the same cause, a want of a civil governor, who should exercise a watchful care over the people, and impose such restraints as should keep them within the bounds of decency and order^d. To appreciate these evils aright, the three last chapters should be attentively perused: the unheard-of wickedness of the Benjamites; the determination of the whole tribe of Benjamin to protect the offenders; the civil war arising from it; the repeated defeats of the tribe of Judah; the ultimate destruction of the whole tribe of Benjamin, men, women, and children, with the exception of six hundred men who had fled

^a Judg. xx. 27, 28.

^c Judg. xviii. 7.

^b Judg. xvii. 6. and xviii. 1.

^d Judg. xix. 1. with the text.

from the field of battle; the demolition of all their cities; the destruction also of the whole population of Jabesh Gilead, except four hundred virgins, who were preserved in order to prevent the utter extinction of the tribe of Benjamin; these and other miseries all arose out of this single circumstance, a want of a regular government sufficiently strong to prevent or punish the violations of the laws.

There is one circumstance in this history which seems unaccountable; namely, That when the eleven tribes were united against Benjamin solely for the purpose of demanding justice against the perpetrators of that enormous wickedness, and when Judah led the battle by divine appointment, no less than forty thousand of that tribe should be slain by Benjamin in two battles, whilst the impious Benjamites suffered no loss at all. But God intended by this to punish the supineness of all the tribes, who had neglected to espouse his cause against the idolatrous Danites. They had united as one man, when the interests of society demanded their interposition; but they had taken no steps to vindicate God's honour against the introduction of idolatry, though God had expressly required in his law their most determined interference in his behalf^e. On this account God first made use of the Benjamites to punish them, and then delivered the Benjamites into their hands, that justice should be executed on them also.

But whatever was God's design in these desolating judgments, they must still be all referred to that cause which we have already noticed.

If any further illustration of the point be wanted, we need only behold the evils which are perpetrated even in the best regulated governments, in defiance of the laws; and then we shall see what evils would obtain, if all the restraints of law and justice were withdrawn — — —]

But a vigilant and energetic magistracy stems the torrent of iniquity—

[Where a good government is, there are known and established laws, to which the highest, as well as the lowest in the state, are amenable. Our persons, our property, yea even our reputation, are secured from injury; or, if any injure them, the law affords us suitable redress. If any sons of Belial will break through the restraints which the law has imposed upon them, no sooner are they convicted of the crime, than they pay the penalty with the loss of their liberties or lives. Hence every man feels himself secure: the weak fears not the invasion of his rights any more than the strong; but all sit under their own vine and fig-tree, none making them afraid.

^e Deut. xiii. 12—16.

This security we are apt to overlook: but we can never in reality be too thankful for it. If we were to estimate our state according to truth, we should all consider ourselves like Daniel in the lions' den: the lions have not lost their nature; but they feel a restraint, which, though invisible, operates for our preservation: if that were once withdrawn, we should then, like Daniel's persecutors, soon become a prey to the violent and oppressive.]

But the subject may justly lead us also to consider,
II. The obligations we owe to the Gospel of Christ—

The restraints of Civil Government are external only, and have respect chiefly to the welfare of society: they cannot reach to the thoughts or dispositions of the heart. Hence

Ungodly men do precisely what they please—

[They keep within the regulations of human laws, so far at least as to avoid a criminal prosecution; but they will indulge their lusts in ways which come not within the cognizance of the civil magistrate, and will live altogether “without God in the world.” All indeed do not run to the same excess of riot; but all will equally “do what is right in their own eyes.” All mark out a line for themselves: some give themselves a greater latitude; and some are circumscribed within narrower bounds; but all lay down to themselves certain rules, to which they annex the idea of propriety: and if a minister of the Most High God stand forth to testify against their ways as evil, they will find an host to vindicate their cause, and to inflict the deadliest wounds also on those who dare to assault them in the name of God. The language of their hearts is, “Who is Lord over us?” In vain do we endeavour to convince them of their errors; they are determined to think themselves right: to be “right in their own eyes” is with them a perfect vindication of their conduct: they will not come “to the word and the testimony” of Scripture; that is a test to which they will not submit: and, if only they are free from gross and open sin, they despise the sword of the Spirit, and defy the sharpest arrows that are taken from his quiver.

What we here speak is as applicable to the most righteous among them, as to the most unrighteous. Solomon tells us that “there is a generation that is pure in their own eyes, who are not washed from their filthiness^f.” Their standard of duty, be it what it may, is of their own making: and they follow the laws of God no further than will consist with the regulations which they have formed for themselves — —]

^f Prov. xxx. 12.

But the Gospel produces in them a most blessed change—

[This *establishes a King in Israel*: it represents the Lord Jesus Christ as the Redeemer and the Lord of all; and erects his throne in the hearts of men— —The Gospel *rectifies the views also*, of all that receive it. His law, and not our own vain conceits, becomes now the rule of judgment: the smallest deviation from that, whether by excess or defect, is regarded as evil, and nothing is approved any further than it agrees with that perfect standard— — — We may also add, It *regulates the conduct*. Those who receive the Gospel aright, instantly give themselves up to the Lord Jesus Christ, accounting his service to be perfect freedom, and desiring to live no longer to themselves, but “unto Him that died for them and rose again.” — — — Of course, we must not be understood to say that these effects are produced equally in all, or in any to their full extent. Men are still corrupt creatures, even the best of men; and consequently they will, like brands out of a fire, still bear the mark of the fire, though the flame be extinguished: but still they differ as widely from the unconverted world, as those who live under a well-regulated government do from the most licentious savages: they are thankful for the restraints under which they live; and are ready to die in defence of that King whom they venerate, and that law which they account it their highest privilege to obey. In civilized society, men are happy in being secured from external violence; but, under the Gospel, they are happy in being secured from the assaults of Satan, and from the corruptions of their own hearts.]

From this subject we would take occasion to RECOMMEND,

1. A self-diffident spirit—

[By nothing are the delusions of men more strengthened than by a confidence in their own wisdom and judgment. No reasons will weigh in opposition to the conceits of self-opinionated men; nor will an appeal to the Scriptures themselves be allowed to be of any force. Hence men perish in their errors, till it becomes too late to rectify them. How happy would it be if men would distrust their own judgment; and if, when they see how thousands of their neighbours err, they would admit the possibility of error in themselves! God has given us an unerring standard of truth: to that let us refer all our pre-conceived opinions; and remember, that, “if we walk not according to that rule, there is no light in us.”]

2. A cautious judgment—

[Persons are apt to form their judgment on very inadequate grounds. Any one who should have seen the two defeats of Judah, would be ready to conclude, that the cause for which victory had decided, was the right: but we are not to judge from events: righteousness is not always triumphant in this world: it may be oppressed; and the supporters of it may be trodden under foot: but there is a time when God will vindicate his own cause, and evince the equity of all his dispensations. The unalterable word of God must be our only rule of judgment in every thing: if we suffer in following that, let us not doubt the goodness of our cause, but betake ourselves to fasting and prayer, and, above all, to that great Sacrifice which was once offered for sin. Then, though suffering, we shall reap good to our souls; and, though vanquished now, we shall surely triumph at last.]

3. An unreserved submission to the King of Israel—

[This is true happiness: this once attained, no enemy can hurt us, no occurrence can disturb our peace. “I will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on me, because he trusteth in me.” O that we were all brought to surrender up ourselves unfeignedly to him! Whether we will submit to him or not, “God has set him as his King upon his holy hill of Zion;” and “He will reign, till all his enemies be put under his feet.” “Kiss the Son then, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way:” and “let every imagination that is contrary to his will be cast down, and every thought be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”]

R U T H.

CCLXXVIII.

THE CHARACTER OF RUTH.

Ruth i. 15—17. *She (Naomi) said, Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister-in-law. And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.*

THE study of Scripture characters is very instructive: for, in them, we see human nature in all its diversified conditions, not as artificially delineated by a brilliant fancy or a warm imagination, but as really existing, and exhibited to our view. For subjects of public discussion, too, they are peculiarly favourable; because, in presenting *real* scenes, they bring before us circumstances which are of daily occurrence, or which, at least, are well adapted to shew us how to act, when such circumstances occur. The partings of friends and relatives are common: and, inasmuch as they give birth to a great variety of emotions in the mind, they elicit the inward character with great fidelity. Such is the incident which we are now about to consider, and which will reflect peculiar light on the dispositions of one, who, though a Moabitess by birth, was one of the progenitors of our blessed Lord.

From this farewell scene, and the distinguished excellence of Ruth's behaviour, I shall be led to mark her character,

I. Simply as here depicted—

In the circumstances before us, she approves herself a pattern,

1. Of filial piety—

[Her mother-in-law, Naomi, had long endeared herself to her; and now was about to part with her, and to return to the land of Israel. But Ruth would not suffer her to depart alone, but determined to adhere to her to the latest hour of her life. Nor in this determination was she biased by any selfish hopes of future aggrandizement. Her love was altogether pure and disinterested. She well knew, that, though Naomi was once possessed of opulence, she was now reduced to poverty: nor had Naomi any surviving son, who might be united to her, and raise up seed to his departed brother. All this was faithfully represented by Naomi, both to her and to her sister Orpah, in the most affecting terms: “Naomi said, Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me? Are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn again, my daughters; go your way; for I am too old to have an husband. If I should say, I have hope, if I should have a husband also to-night, and should bear sons, would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands? Nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much, for your sakes, that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me. And they lift up their voice, and wept again^a.” But nothing could shake the resolution of Ruth: she determined to renounce all her old relatives, and the prospects she might have in her native land, and to cleave steadfastly to Naomi, even unto death. And the manner in which she refused to acquiesce in her mother’s proposal was tender and affectionate in the extreme: “Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee.” This, in other words, was as if she had said, “You know that any request of thine, however difficult or self-denying it were, would be obeyed with the utmost alacrity: but to ask me to forsake thee, *this* is too much: it would break my heart: I could not do it: I pray you to forbear putting me to so severe a trial: ‘*Entreat me not to leave thee*,’ for the alternative, of parting with thee or disobeying thy command, is as a sword in my bones, a wound which I cannot possibly endure. Be the sacrifice ever so great, I am ready to make it; I shall delight in making it.”

Thus did this duteous female, from love to her mother, make, in effect, the very reply which St. Paul, many hundred years afterwards, gave, from love to the Saviour, and on an occasion not very dissimilar: “What mean ye to weep and to

^a ver. 11—14.

break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord Jesus^b.”]

2. Of vital godliness—

[This was at the root, and was the true spring of her determined resolution: “Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” She had been instructed by her mother in the knowledge of the true God; and she determined to consecrate herself to his service, and to take her portion with his people. This was very particularly noticed by Boaz, as no less conspicuous than her filial piety: “It hath fully been shewn me all that thou hast done unto thy mother-in-law since the death of thine husband; and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore: the Lord recompense thy work; and a full reward be given thee of *the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust*.” Her desire after God was paramount to every other consideration under heaven. She believed that his people were happy above all other people: and, whatever she might endure in this life, she determined to unite with them, and, as far as possible, to participate their lot. Her views of religion might not be clear: but it is evident that a principle of vital godliness was rooted in her heart, and powerfully operative in her life. In fact, she acted in perfect conformity with that injunction that was afterwards given by our Lord, “Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple^d.”]

But her character will appear in yet brighter colours, if we consider it,

II. As compared with that of Orpah and Naomi—

Compare it with that of Orpah—

[Orpah loved her mother-in-law; and, at first, determined not to part from her. In answer to the suggestions of Naomi, she joined with Ruth in saying, “Surely we will return with thee unto thy people^e.” But, when a faithful representation was given her respecting the sacrifices she would be called to make, she repented of her good intentions, and, taking an affectionate leave of her mother-in-law, “returned to *her own* people, and to her idol-gods^f.” Like the rich youth in the Gospel, she departed, reluctantly indeed, yet finally and for ever^g. “Orpah,” it is said, “kissed her mother-in-law: but Ruth clave unto her^h.” Happy Ruth! “thou didst

^b Acts xxi. 13.

^c Ruth ii. 11, 12.

^d Luke xiv. 33.

^e ver. 10.

^f ver. 15.

^g Matt. xix. 21, 22.

^h ver. 14.

choose the better part: and never was it taken from theeⁱ, nor ever hadst thou reason to regret thy choice. It was wise as that of Moses, when he “chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season^k.” We congratulate thee on the strength of thy principles, or rather, on the grace given thee of the Lord. Unhappy Orpah! we know not what was thy condition in after life: but, whatever it was, dost thou not now bemoan thine instability? Dost thou not now wish that thou hadst been faithful to thy convictions, and hadst cast in thy lot with God’s chosen people? As for thee, Ruth, thou favoured saint, even if thou hadst been as miserable in after life as thou wast happy, we should have pronounced thee blessed: but doubly blessed wast thou in the distinctions conferred upon thee in this world, as earnest of the glory which thou inheritest in the realms of bliss, even in the bosom of thy descendant, thy Saviour, and thy God.]

Compare it, also, with that of Naomi—

[That Naomi was a pious character, we have no doubt; and amiable too: for by her conduct she conciliated the regard of both her daughters-in-law, who, though Moabites by birth, were through her convinced of the superior excellence of the Jewish religion, and the superior happiness of those who were imbued with it. And we cannot but earnestly call the attention of Christian parents to this trait of Naomi’s character. For there are too many, who, whilst they profess godliness, make it odious to all who come in contact with them, and especially to those who are dependent on them. Their tempers are so hasty, so imperious, so ungoverned, that their very daughters are glad of an occasion to get from under their roof. I must tell all such professors, that they are a disgrace to their profession; and that if religion do not make us lovely and amiable in all our family relations, it does nothing for us, but deceives us to our ruin.

Yet I cannot think very highly of Naomi’s character, when I see the advice which she gave to her daughters. She loved them, it is true: but her love was of too carnal a nature: for she had more respect to their temporal welfare than to the welfare of their souls. Some would offer an apology for her; that she only intended to try the sincerity of their love. But, supposing she had done this in the first instance, which yet she had no right to do, especially when they had both said, “Surely we will return with thee unto thy people:” (I say again, she had no right to “cast a stumbling-block in their way,” and by repeated entreaties to urge their return to their

ⁱ Luke x. 42.

^k Heb. xi. 25.

idolatrous friends and their idol-gods:) but when she saw, unhappily, that she had prevailed with Orpah, had she any right to urge Ruth to follow her sad example? Should she not rather have rent her garments, yea, and torn the very hair from her head with anguish, at the thought of having so fatally prevailed to ruin her daughter's soul? Should she not rather have striven to undo what she had done to Orpah, than continue to exert the same fatal influence with Ruth? Should not the advice of Moses to Hobab have been hers to both of them, "Come with me, and God will do you good!" Naomi, thou hast given us a picture too often realized in the present day: in thee we see a mother more anxious about the providing of husbands for her daughters, than the saving of their souls. Thou didst love thy daughters, it is true; but thy concern for their temporal welfare overpowered all other considerations, and not only kept thee from leading their minds to God, but actually induced thee to exert thine influence in opposition to their good desires: thou wast a tempter to them, when thou shouldest have done all in thy power to keep them from temptation, and have had thy whole soul bent on securing their everlasting salvation. Beloved Ruth, we bless God that thou wast enabled to withstand the solicitations given thee, though from so high a quarter: for we are told by our Lord and Saviour, "He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me^m." Thou didst well, in that thy refusal was so tender, so affectionate, so respectful: but still thou didst well, also, that thou wast firm. Thy firmness has reflected a lustre on thy character: for whilst it detracted nothing from thy filial piety, seeing that "we must obey God rather than man," it has shewn how much more pure thy love was than that of thy mother, and how much more rigid and firm thy piety.]

ADDRESS—

1. To parents—

[Learn, I pray you, from Naomi; learn to instruct your children and dependents in the knowledge of the true God, and to conciliate their regards by the most unwearied efforts of tenderness and love. But beware how you discourage in them any good desire. I will grant that there are in Scripture other instances of persons labouring to counteract the movements of personal affection. Ittai, the Gittite, when following David in his flight from Absalom, was urged to leave himⁿ; as Elisha also was repeatedly by Elijah previous to his assumption to heaven^o. But there was no positive duty lying upon

¹ Numb. x. 29—32.

ⁿ 2 Sam. xv. 19—21.

^m Matt. x. 37.

^o 2 Kings ii. 2, 4, 6.

them, or, at all events, none which David and Elijah were not at liberty to dispense with. But Naomi had no right whatever to discourage the pious purposes of her daughters: if she had chosen to dispense with their attendance on her, she had no authority to dissuade them from devoting themselves to God. Remember, then, the true limits of your authority: it *may* be, and *should* be, *energetically* used for God: but it must not, even *in advice*, be used *against* him. Your influence is great; and on it may depend the salvation of your offspring. Oh, what a grief must it have been to Naomi, in after life, that she had given such fatal counsel to her apostate daughter! And who can tell what cause you may have to bewail the discouraging of pious emotions in your children, even in one single instance? And think not that even piety renders this caution unnecessary. Rebekah was pious; yet when she feared that her beloved Jacob would lose the birthright, what a device did she suggest, and with what horrid impiety did she urge him to adopt it^p! Beware, I say, of following Naomi in this respect; and rather use your influence, like Lois and Eunice, for the training of your Timothy to the highest attainments of piety and virtue^q.]

2. To young people—

[Cultivate, to the utmost, an affectionate and obediential spirit towards your parents. This is a frame of mind peculiarly pleasing to God. When he enjoined it in the Decalogue, he wrote it with his own finger on a tablet of stone: and it is distinguished above all the other commandments by this, that it was “the first commandment with promise^r.” The exercise of this spirit pre-eminently characterized our blessed Lord in his early days: “He went down with his parents to Nazareth, and was subject unto them^s.” This is the best return that you can make to your parents for all the care which they take of you, and all their labours for your good. Especially, if, like Naomi, they be brought into affliction and penury, forsake them not *then*; but rather redouble your attentions to them; and account no sacrifice too great to make, if by any means you may be a comfort to them in their declining years.

At the same time be attentive to the concerns of your souls. Embrace the God of Israel as your God; and worship him, and serve him, and “cleave unto him with full purpose of heart^t.” And let no hopes of improving your temporal condition, either in marriage or in any other way, draw you aside from him. Renounce all for God; and “count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus your Lord.” If

^p Gen. xxvii. 12, 13.

^q 2 Tim. i. 5.

^r Eph. vi. 2.

^s Luke ii. 51.

^t Acts xi. 23.

others turn from the Lord, and go back unto the world, do not ye follow them. Even though they be your near relatives, with whom you have been bound in ties of the closest amity, let them not prevail: yea, though *their prudence* be proposed to you as the fittest pattern to follow, and the proposal come from the highest authority, still be faithful to your convictions; and be faithful to your God. This will issue most to your satisfaction; this will bring you peace at the last: for so it is written; "Hearken, O daughter, and incline thine ear: forget, also, thine own people, and thy father's house: so will the King greatly desire thy beauty: for He is thy Lord; and worship thou him^u."

^u Ps. xlv. 10, 11.

CCLXXIX.

THE CHANGES MADE BY TIME AND CIRCUMSTANCES.

Ruth i. 19. *It came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?*

TO *seek* the applause of man is wrong: but to *merit* it, is most desirable. A man of worthless character creates no respect in the minds of others; so that, if ill befall him, he finds but little sympathy in the bosoms of those around him: whereas a good man under misfortune, excites a general commiseration; and every one takes a lively interest in his affairs. This is beautifully exemplified in the history before us. Naomi was certainly a woman of piety, and much esteemed. In a season of dearth she had left her country with her husband and sons; and, after ten years' absence, she returned in a bereaved and destitute condition, having lost her husband and her two sons, and having no attendant but a daughter-in-law, as poor and destitute as herself. Yet, behold, she no sooner reaches the place of her former abode, than the whole city is moved with her misfortunes, every one feeling for her as for a sister, and with tender concern exclaiming, "Is this Naomi?"

The circumstance here recorded will lead me to shew you,

I. What changes take place in life—

This is altogether a changing scene; every day bringing with it something new, to elevate or depress our minds. Some changes are of a favourable nature, such as the growth of our children in wisdom and stature; the advancement of our friends in wealth and honour; and, above all, the conversion of the gay and dissipated to the knowledge of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. These things sometimes occur so suddenly and beyond our expectation, that we scarcely know how to credit them; and we are ready to ask, with pleasing surprise, Is this Naomi, whom I remember not long since under such different circumstances?

But it is rather of afflictive changes that our text leads us to speak: and we shall notice them,

1. In relation to temporal matters—

[What effects are wrought by disease or accident in the space of only a few days, we all are well aware. The person who but as yesterday was flourishing in health, vigour, beauty, is become enfeebled, emaciated, yea, a mass of deformity, so that you exclaim, with almost incredulous surprise, Is this Naomi? Nor are changes less quickly made in the outward circumstances of men, one day living in affluence and all the splendour of wealth; the next, reduced to penury and shame. The age in which we live has been fruitful in such examples, princes and nobles having taken refuge, and found subsistence from the hands of charity, in our happy isle^a; and, since that period, multitudes of our most opulent merchants having fallen from the highest pinnacle of grandeur to insignificance and want. Nor is it uncommon to behold a man, who by his talents has commanded universal admiration, brought, through disorder or through age, to a state of more than infantine fatuity; so that he can be no longer recognised but as a wreck and ruin of the former man.

The circumstances of Naomi lead me to mention yet another change, namely, that of family bereavements. We have seen persons in the full enjoyment of domestic happiness, with children, numerous, healthy, playful, the joy and delight of their parents, by successive strokes brought to a state of widowhood and desolation. Behold the disconsolate widow, “weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because they are not;” and because the husband, who was her stay and

^a During the French Revolution.

her support, is either languishing on a bed of sickness, or wrested from her by resistless death! In a word, see Job encircled with his family, and in the fullest possession of all that the world could give him: Ah! how fallen! how destitute! What a complete picture of human misery, and of the vanity of all sublunary good!]

2. In relation to spiritual concerns—

[The most distressing sight is that of one who once was hopeful as to the concerns of his soul, but has “left off to behave himself wisely,” and launched forth into all manner of dissipation: or, if a more pitiable object can present itself to our view, it is that of one, who, after attaining an eminence in the Christian life, has fallen into a state of wilful and habitual sin, and brought public disgrace upon his holy profession. David will here naturally occur to our minds. Look at him: “Is this David?” the man so abhorrent of evil, that he would not suffer a person who should utter a falsehood to dwell in his sight? Ah! how fallen! how unlike this murderer is to “the sweet singer of Israel,” “the man after God’s own heart!” And Solomon, too; Is this Solomon? that perfection of wisdom, whom all proclaimed as the wisest of the human race, now so infatuated, as to seek his happiness in a number of wives and concubines; and so impious, as both to gratify them, and to unite with them, in the most abominable idolatries?^b Is this Solomon? I say: Who can believe it?

But must we go back to those distant ages for instances of human frailty and depravity? Would to God that they were of such rare occurrence, that none had ever arisen in our own remembrance. But wherever the Gospel is preached, instances will be found of persons who “ran well for a season only,” and who, though they “began in the Spirit, have ended in the flesh.” Look at any such persons now, and see how unlike they are to their former selves! “How is the gold become dim, and the most fine gold changed!”]

But, that we may duly improve these occurrences, let us consider,

II. What feelings the contemplation of them should inspire—

We should not be uninterested spectators of such events: they should excite in us,

1. Sympathy—

[In no case should we exult over fallen greatness. We read, indeed, of the triumphant utterance of joy at the fall of

^b 1 Kings xi. 1—10.

the Babylonish monarch, agreeably to the predictions respecting him^c — — — And similar exultation was felt at the destruction of Jerusalem; as it is said: "All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, *Is this the city that men call the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth*^d?" But though these gloryings were permitted by God for the punishment of his enemies, they are not recorded for our imitation. We, like our blessed Lord, should weep over the desolations even of our bitterest enemies^e. We should "bear one another's burthens, and so fulfil the law of Christ^f." The sight of misery, wheresoever it is found, should call forth our tenderest sympathy, and cause us to "weep with them that weep^g." This is particularly suggested by the conduct of the people at Bethlehem: "The whole city was moved" at the sight of this poor widow, whom they had not seen for the space of ten years; and one sentiment of compassion filled all ranks of people, saying, "Is this Naomi?" So let it be with us, whether we be able to relieve the sufferer, or not. The very feeling of compassion will be pleasing to our God; and will assimilate us to that blessed Saviour, who pitied us in our low estate, and "who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we, through his poverty, might be rich^h."

2. Contentment—

[In such a changeable world as this, what is there for us to covet? Shall we desire riches? How soon do "they make themselves wings, and fly awayⁱ!" Shall we affect honour? How soon may our Hosannahs be turned into, "Crucify him, crucify him!" As for pleasure, of whatever kind, so vain is it all, that "even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness^k." Indeed, the whole world, even if we could possess it all, is but "vanity and vexation of spirit." If we "have wives, our true wisdom is to be as though we had none; if we weep, to be as though we wept not; or, if we rejoice, as though we rejoiced not: if we buy, to be as though we possessed not; and, if we use this world, as not abusing it: because *the fashion of this world passeth away*¹." If changes of the most calamitous nature occur, we should remember, that "nothing has happened to us but what is common to man," and nothing but what may issue either in our temporal or eternal good. There are not wanting instances of the deepest reverses being themselves reversed: for Job's

^c Isai. xiv. 4—11. Almost this whole passage should be cited.

^d Lam. ii. 15.

^e Luke xix. 41, 42.

^f Gal. vi. 2.

^g Rom. xii. 15.

^h 2 Cor. viii. 9.

ⁱ Prov. xxiii. 5.

^k Prov. xiv. 13.

¹ 1 Cor. vii. 29—31.

prosperity, after his distresses, far exceeded any thing that he had enjoyed in his earlier life^m. Naomi, too, found, in the issue, that she had no reason to “adopt the name of Maraⁿ :” for her subsequent connexion with Boaz soon dissipated all her sorrows, so that she could “put off her sackcloth and gird her with gladness.” But, if this should not be the case, we may well be satisfied that “tribulation worketh patience, and experience and hope,” and that our light and momentary afflictions work out “for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory^o.” In the view, then, of all these things, we should “learn, in whatsoever state we are, therewith to be content: we should be equally ready to be abased or to abound, and to be instructed everywhere, and in all things, both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need^p.”]

3. Piety—

[This will never fail us. If we have much, it will sanctify our prosperity, and keep it from injuring our souls. If we have little, it will supply the lack of every thing. View the rich man in all his abundance, and Lazarus in all his destitution. The eye of *sense* will look with envy on the one that is revelling in plenty: the eye of *faith* will form a far different estimate, and congratulate the sufferer in the midst of all his distresses. The wealth of this world brings with it many cares and troubles: but “the blessing of God maketh rich, and addeth no sorrow with it^q.” Even whilst the two were here in this world, no doubt the poorer was the happier man. But at the moment of their departure hence, what different feelings would have been expressed, if they had still been subjected to the sight of man! Is this the rich man—now destitute of a drop of water to cool his tongue? Is this Lazarus—now in the bosom of Abraham, at the banquet of the Lord? So, then, shall it ere long be said of you, ye sons and daughters of affliction, if only ye improve your trials for the furtherance of your spiritual welfare. How soon shall all “your tears be wiped away from your eyes!” How soon shall “joy and gladness come forth to meet you; and sorrow and sighing flee away for ever!” “Be patient, then, unto the coming of your Lord:” and you shall soon find, that “the sufferings of this present life were not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us^r.”]

^m Job xlii. 10—16.

ⁿ ver. 20.

^o 2 Cor. iv. 17, 18.

^p Phil. iv. 11, 12.

^q Prov. x. 22.

^r Rom. viii. 18.

CCLXXX.

BOAZ AND HIS REAPERS.

Ruth ii. 4. *And, behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said unto the reapers, The Lord be with you. And they answered him, The Lord bless thee.*

EVERY season suggests to us some appropriate considerations: and even the most common incidents of life are capable of affording us very important instruction. Certainly, at first sight, a man's intercourse with his reapers would not promise much for spiritual edification: but the address of Boaz to his people, and their reply to him, were altogether so different from what is usual in our day, that we shall find our time not unprofitably employed in the investigation of them.

I. *Their mutual address* is the first thing to be considered—

It may be understood in a two-fold view;

1. As a friendly salutation—

[It seems probable that, if not at that time, yet in after ages, this kind of address was common in the time of harvest ^a. But, as used on this occasion, it deserves peculiar notice; both as expressing great condescension and kindness on *his* part, and as evincing much respect and gratitude on *theirs*. Boaz, it must be remembered, was “*a mighty man of wealth* ^b :” and therefore *any* notice from *him* might be deemed an act of condescension, and more especially *this*, which conveyed to their minds such a sense of paternal love. And their reply argued a becoming feeling of filial respect. Into how many fields might we go, before we heard such greetings as these! How much more frequently might we hear *complaints respecting the work*, on the one part; and *murmuring concerning the wages*, on the other part! Notwithstanding the superior advantages we enjoy, and the higher attainments which, in consequence, we might be expected to make in every thing that was amiable and praiseworthy, how uncommon an occurrence should we deem it, if we chanced to witness such greetings in the present day! The true picture of modern life may be drawn in those words of Solomon, “The poor useth entreaties; but the rich answereth roughly ^c.”]

^a Ps. cxxix. 7, 8.

^b ver. 1.

^c Prov. xviii. 23.

2. As a devout benediction—

[From the piety evinced by Boaz, we may well suppose that these benevolent expressions, on both sides, were not a mere customary form; but a real desire, in the bosoms of them all, for their mutual welfare in reference to the eternal world. How lovely was the address, how suitable the answer, in this view! It is remarkable, that the Apostle Paul begins and ends almost every epistle with prayers and benedictions, expressive of his love for the souls of men. And such ought our correspondence to be, even when the main subject of our letters refers to temporal concerns. Such, too, should be our daily intercourse with friends and servants, in the house, or in the field. Who does not admire this interview between persons so distant in rank, yet so allied in spirit? Let us, then, cultivate the spirit here manifested: for, verily, if it universally obtained, we should enjoy almost a heaven upon earth.]

II. The next point for us to consider, is, *What instruction we should gather from it—*

We may learn from it,

1. That the blessing of God is our chief good—

[This, under any view of their expressions, is evidently implied. The wealth of Boaz, if he had possessed ten thousand different estates, would have been of no real value without the blessing of God; and with that, the men who laboured in reaping down his fields were truly rich. It is the light of God's countenance which is the only solid good^d: "In his presence is life; and his loving-kindness is better than life itself^e."]

2. That religion then appears in its true colours, when it regulates our conduct in social life—

[It is in vain for a man to pretend to religion, if in his daily converse with the world he do not manifest its power to transform the soul. What is the knowledge even of an angel, without love? What the faith that could remove mountains? What the zeal that could give all our goods to feed the poor, or even our bodies to be burnt for Jesus' sake? We speak advisedly when we say, that in the full possession of all these excellencies we should be no better than "sounding brass and tinkling cymbals," if we were not under the habitual influence of love^f. Know ye, Brethren, that your religion must be seen, not in the church or in the closet only, but in the shop, the family, the field. It must mortify pride, and every other evil

^d Ps. iv. 6. ^e Ps. xxx. 5. and lxiii. 3. ^f 1 Cor. xiii. 1—3.

passion; and must bring forth into exercise "all the mind that was in Christ Jesus^g." Try yourselves by this standard: see what you are, as husbands or wives, parents or children, masters or servants. See whether you possess the courtesy of Boaz, or the respectful love of his reapers. It is in this way that you are to shine as lights in a dark world. It is in this way that you are to put to shame the specious pretences of politeness, and the feigned humility of those who are candidates for earthly honour: your courtesy must be the genuine offspring of Christian benevolence; and your whole deportment, a visible exhibition of your Saviour's image.]

And now, not as a master to his servants, but as a father to his children, I say, "The Lord be with you!" And may there be in all of you a responsive voice, imploring the blessing of Almighty God on him, who truly, though unworthily, seeks your welfare.

"The Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."

^g Phil. ii. 4, 5.

CCLXXXI.

RUTH'S PIETY AND REWARD.

Ruth ii. 11, 12. *And Boaz answered and said unto her, It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother-in-law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore. The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.*

THE book of Ruth contains only the domestic occurrences of one poor family: and it may well excite our wonder, that such trifling incidents should occupy the pen of inspiration, when the affairs of kingdoms and nations are overlooked. But there is nothing trifling that relates to morals: and still less, that relates to the Messiah. Were there nothing contained here but an exhibition of filial piety, it would not be recorded in vain; because a very principal intent of the inspired volume is, to rectify, in every relation of life, the dispositions and habits

of mankind. But an attentive reader of this history will discover in it a fund of rich instruction. To assist you in this search, we shall set before you,

I. The general circumstances of the history—

Not having time to notice every thing, we shall confine ourselves to those parts which deserve our more especial attention. The famine that was in the land of Canaan “in the days of one of the Judges,” the consequent departure of Elimelech with his wife and children into the land of Moab, the marriage of his two sons with Moabitish women, the death of Elimelech and of both his sons, the return of his wife Naomi to her native land, when she heard that God had restored plenty to it: these and other circumstances we pass over in silence, in order that we may enter more fully into the things which relate to Ruth.

Ruth was the wife of Mahlon, Naomi's son: and to her this history principally relates. Two things in particular are stated concerning her, and they are distinctly specified in the words of our text; namely,

1. Her piety—

[This was so conspicuous, that it was a matter of notoriety, and a theme of high commendation, at Bethlehem, almost as soon as she arrived there. On Naomi's adopting the resolution to return to her own country, Ruth, though a Moabitess, determined to accompany her: and, though Naomi stated faithfully to her the many inconveniences that would attend it, she would suffer nothing to divert her from her purpose. She had been instructed by Naomi in the knowledge of the only true God, and had seen in her the beauty and excellence of practical religion; and she determined to participate Naomi's lot, whatever it might be, and to give herself up a living sacrifice to Naomi's God. True it was, that in order to this she must relinquish all her own relations, and abandon all hopes of ever receiving benefits from them: but she had counted the cost, and deliberately preferred an adherence to Naomi and Naomi's God, before her country, her kindred, and all that the world could give her. The terms in which she expressed her resolution strongly marked the firmness of her purpose; “Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I

will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me^a."

Here is a pattern of true piety, and particularly as contrasted with Orpah, the relict of Naomi's other son. Orpah, as well as Ruth, was much attached to her mother-in-law Naomi; but she had not a supreme regard for the God of Israel: and therefore, when she saw what she must forego in order to accompany Naomi, she drew back, and returned to her own people and their gods. When the final decision was to be made, we are told, "They all lift up their voice and wept again: and Orpah *kissed* her mother-in-law; but Ruth *clave unto* her^b." Could Orpah have adhered to Naomi without making any sacrifices, she would have done it; but if she must give up all her prospects in life in such a cause, she will not pay the price. She parts indeed with much regret; but still she parts; like the Rich Youth that turned his back on Christ, because he could not bring his mind to the terms which were required of him^c. O that we may learn justly to appreciate the characters of Ruth and Orpah; and instead of drawing back, like Orpah, through the love of this world, may we follow rather the steps of pious Ruth, and "cleave unto the Lord with full purpose of heart." This is what our God requires of all; nor will our Saviour on any other terms acknowledge us as his disciples^d.]

2. Her reward—

[Though she knew not at all in what way God would requite her, yet she went forward, committing all her concerns to him, and "putting her trust under the shadow of his wings." Nor was she long before she experienced the tender mercies of her God. On her arrival at Bethlehem, she went into a field to glean some barley for the subsistence of herself, and of Naomi, whose infirmities rendered her unfit for so laborious an employment. Immediately, beyond all expectation, she was treated with great kindness by the reapers; and speedily afterwards by Boaz also, the owner of the field; who gave his servants a strict charge concerning her, and not only recommended her to glean in company with his maidens till the end of harvest, but authorized her to take a portion of their food, and bade the reapers to drop handfuls of corn for her, that she might reap the richer fruits of her industry. On her expressing her astonishment at all this unexpected kindness, she was informed by Boaz that it was a reward for the piety she had exercised towards her afflicted mother-in-law, and towards the Lord God of Israel.

^a Ruth i. 16, 17.

^b Ruth i. 14.

^c Matt. xix. 21, 22.

^d Luke xiv. 26, 27, 33.

Laden with an extraordinary quantity of corn, she went home at the evening to Naomi; who, finding on inquiry that this benefactor was Boaz, a near relation of her own, encouraged her to follow the advice he had given her, and to glean in no other fields but his. Moreover, when Naomi found that this kindness of Boaz continued to the end of harvest, she began to think that God might incline the heart of Boaz to execute the office which belonged to the person who was nearest of kin to one who had died childless, namely, to marry the widow, and "raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance." In the hope of this, she advised Ruth to adopt a measure, which certainly to us appears exceeding strange, and which cannot be satisfactorily accounted for, except we suppose Naomi to have been actuated by a divine impulse, or at least by a firm reliance on God, whose glory, in this matter, she principally consulted. The expedient, dangerous as it was, succeeded: and Boaz agreed, that if another person who was nearer of kin to Ruth than himself should decline the office, he would instantly take it upon himself. The very next morning Boaz made the proposal publicly to the man who had a prior right; and then, on his declining to fulfil his duty, openly avowed his determination to fulfil it himself; and called the elders of the city to attest his redemption of her inheritance, and his espousal of her for his lawful wife. Thus wonderfully did God reward her for all her piety. Still further, though she had lived several years with her husband, and had borne no child, yet now it pleased God to confer on her that which was the great desire of her soul, and to make her a mother in Israel: yea, so greatly did God honour her, that David, the greatest of all the kings of Israel, sprang from her, as the grandson of her child; and the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the Saviour of the world, was lineally descended from her.

How richly was now that prayer of Boaz answered to her, "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given to thee of the Lord God of Israel!"

Such being the principal circumstances of the history, we proceed to notice,

II. The light which it reflects on subjects of the greatest moment—

And here a flood of light breaks in upon us. Truly the history is replete with instruction: independent of the *moral* duties which it inculcates, such as those of parental care and filial love, or the *religious* duties, such as affiance in God and devotion to his service, it reflects a light on,

1. The ways of Providence—

[Little do persons think, when brought into great affliction, what good may be derived from it, or what are the ultimate designs of God in it. When Naomi first came to Bethlehem, and was recognised by her old acquaintance, she said to them, “Call me not Naomi, but Mara,” that is, not *Pleasant*, but *Bitter*^e; but within a few weeks she was congratulated as the happiest of women^f: so completely was that Scripture verified in her, “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; that he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people. He maketh the barren woman to keep house, to be a joyful mother of children^g.” The ways by which her exaltation was effected, appeared fortuitous; but they were all ordered by the Lord, who foresaw the end from the beginning. It is said in the history, that “Ruth’s *hap* was to light on a part of the field belonging to Boaz.” Thus, as far as it was *her act*, it was casual and undesigned; but as a link in God’s chain, it was entirely ordered of the Lord. The same must be observed in reference to every other part of the history: the minutest event in it, as in that of Joseph, was under the immediate control of God, who made use of the most contingent means to accomplish his own eternal purpose. Let not any then, however reduced, conclude that their case is desperate, or that God has brought them into such a state *for evil*: for, as the bondage and imprisonment of Joseph were steps to his highest exaltation, so may our heaviest afflictions be the appointed means of bringing us to the most exalted good. “God’s ways are in the great deep, and his footsteps are not known:” and he not unfrequently “makes the depths of the sea a way for his ransomed to pass over^h.”]

2. The wonders of Redemption—

[Two things were enjoined by the law of Moses for the express purpose of shadowing forth the redemption of the world; the one was, that the nearest of kin should have a right to redeem an inheritance which his relation had mortgagedⁱ; and the other was, that the brother of a person who died childless should marry his widow, in order to raise up seed to the departed person, and to prevent his name from perishing in Israel^k. These prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ as our kinsman, “bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh,” redeeming us by his own precious blood; and uniting himself to us, that we may bring forth fruit unto God^l. Now both of these things were done in the history

^e Ruth i. 20.

^f Ruth iv. 14, 15.

^g Ps. cxiii. 7—9.

^h Isai. li. 10.

ⁱ Lev. xxv. 25.

^k Deut. xxv. 5—10.

^l Rom. vii. 4.

before us: Boaz, as the kinsman of Ruth, purchased her to be his wife; and also redeemed her inheritance, that she, together with himself, might have the enjoyment of it. When he called the elders to be witnesses of the transaction, these were his own words; "Ye are witnesses this day, that *I have bought* all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi: moreover, Ruth, the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, *have I purchased* to be my wife^m." Both the one and the other he obtained by purchase, being entitled so to do by the special ties of consanguinity: and we are expressly told, that the Lord Jesus Christ assumed our nature for that very purpose, that, "being made of a woman, and under the law, he might redeem them that were under the lawⁿ." The words of the Apostle are, "Forasmuch as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage^o." How interesting then does this portion of the inspired records become, when we behold what a mystery is contained in it!]

3. The call of the Gentiles into the Church of Christ—

[In common cases it was unlawful for an Israelite to marry one of the daughters of Moab: but Ruth was become a proselyte to the Jewish religion, and was therefore entitled to all the privileges of a child of Abraham. Still as a Moabitess, taken into that line from whence the Messiah was to spring, and actually made an instrument of continuing the succession whereby he was brought into the world, she was a witness for God to the Gentile world that he had not utterly forsaken them; but that they in due time should be incorporated with his chosen people, and become partakers of his salvation. Previous to this period, she was barren; but now she bore a son, through whom thousands and myriads were born to God: and in being the lineal ancestor of Christ, she was instrumental to the happiness of all that shall be saved by him, even of us Gentiles, as well as of those that were of Jewish descent. To her therefore we may eminently apply those words of the prophet, "Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear! break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child! for more are the children of the desolate, than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord^p." Let none then apprehend that they are so far off, but that they may yet

^m Ruth iv. 9, 10.

ⁿ Gal. iv. 4, 5.

^o Heb. ii. 14, 15.

^p Isai. liv. 1.

be brought nigh by the blood of Jesus, and "sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of God."]

4. The procedure of God in the day of judgment—

[Rewards do not always accompany virtue in this world, because God has appointed a day wherein he will judge the world in righteousness, and reward every one according to his works. But there are some instances wherein God appears for his people now, in order that he may give a specimen, as it were, of what he will do hereafter: and such an instance is exhibited in the history before us: Ruth's love to Naomi, and her confidence in the God of Israel, were richly recompensed. And who shall ever fail of recompence, that devotes himself unfeignedly to the God of Israel, and surrenders for him all his worldly prospects and comforts? We must indeed bear in mind the difference between the conduct of Orpah and of Ruth: it is not by a profession of love, but by the actual manifestation of it, that we must approve ourselves to God: we must not be contented with saluting his people, but must adhere to them, deliberately braving all difficulties and trials, and determinately adhering to his sacred cause. Let us only act in this manner; and the whole universe, like the Bethlehemites on that occasion, shall soon witness our reward^q.]

^q Matt. xix. 29. with Ps. xlv. 10.

1 S A M U E L.

CCLXXXII.

HANNAH'S SONG OF THANKSGIVING.

1 Sam. ii. 1—10. *And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the Lord, mine horn is exalted in the Lord; my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God. Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength. They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry ceased: so that the barren hath born seven; and she that hath many children is waxed feeble. The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and he hath set the world upon them. He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the Lord shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his King, and exalt the horn of his Anointed.*

THE return which mankind in general make to God for his mercies is, to idolize the gift, and forget the Giver. Directly opposite to this is the conduct of those who are truly pious: they value the gift only in proportion to its real worth, and rise in heavenly contemplations to the Donor himself; thus making the creature an occasion of exalting and

magnifying the Creator. We observe this particularly in the history of Hannah, whose devout acknowledgments we have just recited. She had been greatly afflicted on account of her not bearing any child to her husband Elkanah, whilst Peninnah, who was his other wife, had borne several. Her grief was daily augmented by the unkind behaviour of Peninnah; nor could all the kindness and love that she experienced from her husband, remove it. She carried her complaints therefore to the Lord, who alone was able to relieve them: unto him she vowed, that if he would grant her a son, she would dedicate him to the service of the sanctuary, and that he should be a Nazarite from the womb. Having obtained her request from God, she now came to perform her vow: as soon as the child could with any propriety be separated from her, it is thought at three or four years old, she took him with her to the tabernacle at Shiloh, and there, for the whole remainder of his days, “lent him to the Lord.” At the time of surrendering him up, she burst forth in this song of praise and thanksgiving, in which she takes occasion, from the mercy vouchsafed to her, to adore the goodness of God as manifested towards the whole creation. She mentions,

I. The perfections of his nature—

Unless we are fully aware of the desire which the Jewish women felt to have the Messiah spring from them, we shall not be able to account for the extreme grief occasioned by barrenness, or for the exultation arising from the birth of a child. But to all the common grounds of joy which Hannah had in the birth of Samuel, that of her deliverance from the taunts and insults of her rival was a great addition: and to that she had especial respect in the opening of this song — — — But, after this slight mention of her own particular case, she proceeds to celebrate,

1. The power and holiness of God—

[God does not always interpose in this world to display his hatred of sin, or to vindicate the oppressed; because there

is a day coming, when he will rectify all the present inequalities of his moral government: but he does not leave himself altogether without witness, that he is a righteous Governor, and a powerful Avenger. His effectual interposition on this occasion was, in Hannah's eyes, a decisive proof, yea and a glorious exhibition too, of his holiness and power; and gave her an assurance, that as these perfections were essential to his nature, and unbounded in their extent, so they should ever be called forth into activity in behalf of all who should trust in him — — —]

2. His wisdom and equity—

[Great was her consolation, that whilst she was judged uncharitably by her fellow-creatures, she had One to whom she could commit her cause; One who was privy to every thought of her heart, and would put a just construction upon the whole of her conduct: and, in the contemplation of this truth, she exulted over those who had so proudly and so arrogantly condemned her. And truly this is one of the richest sources of consolation that any person can have, when suffering under misrepresentations or calumnies of whatever kind: yea, it is quite sufficient to tranquillize the mind, and to raise it above all those feelings which oppression is calculated to produce^a — — —]

II. The dispensations of his providence—

[Here the pious Hannah extends her views from herself to the world at large; and declares, that the change thus produced in her state, is illustrative of what is done by God throughout the whole creation. In *the events of war*—in *the enjoyment of plenty*—in *the increase of families*—in *the continuance of life*—in *the possession of wealth*—and in *advancement to honour*—who does not see that the greatest changes take place, even when least expected^b? and who therefore must not be convinced of the folly of indulging either presumptuous confidence, on the one hand, or desponding fears on the other? None can say, “I am so strong, I shall never be moved;” nor ought any one to say, “There is no hope:” the afflicted should “weep, as though they wept not;” and the prosperous “rejoice, as though they rejoiced not;” each being aware that their condition may soon be altered, and shall be, if God see it on the whole conducive to their good.]

III. The purposes of his grace—

From a view of temporal concerns, she rises to those which are spiritual and eternal: indeed here her words are evidently prophetic, and relate,

^a 1 Cor. iv. 3—5.

^b ver. 4—8.

1. To the Church—

[She had found to her joy what care God takes of his people: and she confidently declared, that that care should be extended to all his saints, even to the end of time. Their adversaries might lay snares for their feet; but HE would “keep their feet;” he would “keep them from falling, and present them faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy^c”— — — On the other hand, his adversaries should assuredly be confounded by him: however they might vindicate themselves now, they should soon “be silent in darkness;” and though now they might defy him, as it were, to his face, he would thunder upon them out of heaven, and utterly, yea eternally, destroy them — — —]

2. To the Church’s King, the Messiah himself—

[As yet there had been no king in Israel; nor was there for fifty years afterwards: and therefore it is reasonable to think that she spake of Him, whose throne was in due time to be erected in the hearts of men, even the Lord Jesus Christ. This further appears from her characterising him by the very name Messiah, a name never before assigned to the king of Israel, but henceforth intended to designate him before all others; the Messiah, the Anointed, and the Christ, being all terms of precisely the same import. That she spake of *Him*, yet further appears by the marked resemblance between this song, and that which the blessed Virgin poured forth at the prospect of the Saviour’s birth^d. His triumph then she firmly predicts; and declares that his kingdom shall be extended even to “the ends of the earth.” Many efforts will be made to prevent its establishment in the world; but none shall prevail: “his horn shall be exalted,” and all his enemies shall perish.

It may be asked, What had this to do with the particular occasion of Hannah’s thanksgiving? I answer, It is this very thing which constitutes in a very great degree the beauty of this song, and that marks the effects of ardent piety upon the soul: a single mercy, like a stream, leads the soul up to the Fountain-head: and it is then only improved aright, when we take occasion from it to contemplate the fulness that is treasured up there, and that is diffusing all possible blessings, temporal and spiritual, throughout the world: and, inasmuch as the universal reign of Christ is that which will bring most glory to God and most good to men, it ought ever to be uppermost in our minds; and every mercy we enjoy should lead us ultimately to the contemplation of it.]

We may LEARN then from hence,

^c Jude, ver. 24.

^d Luke i. 46—55.

1. The benefit of prayer—

[See how successful she was, though she uttered no words, but only importuned God in her heart^e! And what will God refuse to those who seek him in sincerity and truth?— — The Saviour's promise to us all is this, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, I will do it;" "Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you."

Let all the sons and daughters of affliction bear this in mind. Here is a sure remedy for all their griefs, and an infallible supply for all their wants^f.]

2. The blessedness of true religion—

[Exceeding heavy were Hannah's trials^g: and they were not a little aggravated by the uncharitable surmises of Eli himself^h. But into what holy joy were they turned at last! Thus, when true religion occupies the soul, will even the most afflictive dispensations be overruled for good: our night of sorrow may appear long; but the morning of joy shall soon arise: our seed-time of tears shall be followed with a blessed harvest. Only let us delight in heavenly contemplations, and every perfection of God's nature, every dispensation of his providence, and every purpose of his grace, shall swell, as it were, our tide of joy, till it becomes "unspeakable and glorified."]

^e 1 Sam. i. 10, 12, 13.

^f Ps. xl. 1—3.

^g 1 Sam. i. 6, 7.

^h 1 Sam. i. 13—16.

CCLXXXIII.

THE DANGER OF NEGLECTING THE GREAT SACRIFICE.

1 Sam. ii. 25. *If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him?*

THE consideration of an earthly tribunal is of great use to restrain the wickedness of ungodly men. But as there are innumerable offences which can neither be proved by human testimony, nor defined by human laws, it is necessary that men should be reminded of another tribunal, to which they shall be shortly summoned, and before which they shall be called to a strict account. Long before the deluge this was a topic much enforced by the preachers of religion^a;

^a Jude, ver. 14, 15.

and Eli adverted to it, as well calculated to enforce his exhortations, and to dissuade his sons from their impieties. His sons were transgressors of no common stamp : they are justly reprobated as sons of Belial. Their father being advanced in years, the administration of the priestly office had devolved to them. This office they abused to the purposes of oppression and debauchery. The interposition of their father became highly necessary : as God's vicegerent, he should have vindicated the honour of God, and the rights of his subjects. He should have interposed, not only with parental but judicial authority. He should not only have manifested his detestation of their lewdness and rapacity, but should have punished them with degradation. He however, either from a timidity and supineness incident to age, or from a shameful partiality for his own children, forbore to inflict the punishment they deserved ; and contented himself with expostulations and reproofs. He said to them, " Why do ye such things ? for I hear of your evil doings by all this people. Nay, my sons : for it is no good report that I hear ; ye make the Lord's people to transgress. If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him ; but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him ? " With less hardened criminals these words might have produced a good effect : for if it be awful to be summoned before an earthly judge, how much more so to be called into the presence of God, laden with iniquities, and destitute of any advocate or intercessor !

May our minds be impressed with reverence and godly fear, while we consider the import of this admonition, and deduce from it some suitable and important observations !

The words of the text do not at first sight appear to need much explanation : but we cannot well understand the antithesis, or see the force of the interrogation, without adverting particularly to the circumstances, which occasioned the reproof. The sense is not, That, if a man violate an human law, he shall be condemned by an earthly judge ; and, that

if he violate the divine law, he shall be condemned by God himself: this is far short of its real import.

The sin which the sons of Eli had committed was of a peculiar nature. They, as priests, had a right to certain parts of all the sacrifices that were offered: but, instead of being contented with the parts which God had allotted them, and of burning the fat according to the divine appointment, they sent their servants to strike their flesh-hooks of three teeth into the pot or caldron where the meat was seething, and to take whatsoever the flesh-hook might bring up. If they came before the flesh was put into the caldron, they demanded it raw, together with all the fat that was upon it. If the people objected to such lawless proceedings, or reminded them that they must not forget to burn the fat, the servants were ordered to take away the meat immediately, and by force^b. To these enormities, the young men added others of a most malignant nature: they, who, from their office, should have been ministers of justice, and patterns of all sanctity, availed themselves of their situation to seduce the women, when they came to worship at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation^c. Thus they discouraged the people from even coming to the house of God, and caused them to “abhor the offering of the Lord.”

Now it should be recollected that sacrifices were the instituted means of reconciliation with God: there was no other way in which any offence, whether ceremonial or moral, could be purged, but by the offering of the appointed sacrifice before the door of the tabernacle: without shedding of blood there was to be no remission^d.

It should be remembered further, that these sacrifices were typical of the great sacrifice which Christ was in due time to offer upon the cross. The whole Epistle to the Hebrews was written to establish and illustrate this point. “The blood of bulls and of goats could never take away sin:” they had no efficacy at all, but as they typified him who was to “appear in

^b ver. 16.^c ver. 22.^d Heb. ix. 22.

this last dispensation to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself^e."

In causing therefore the offerings of the Lord to be thus abhorred, the young men sinned in a peculiar manner against God himself: they poured contempt upon the very means which God had provided for their obtaining of pardon and reconciliation with him. Thus they rendered their situation desperate: had they only committed some heinous offence against man, a judge, intrusted with the execution of the laws, might have arbitrated between the parties: he might have punished the delinquents, and obtained satisfaction for the injured person: and, the offenders, if truly penitent, might have brought their offering to God, and thus, through the blood of their sacrifice and the intercession of the priest, have obtained the remission of their sin. But they had sinned immediately against God himself; so that there was no third person to redress the grievance or settle the dispute. Moreover they had despised the only atonement that could be offered for them: yea, in despising the typical, they had, in fact, disclaimed all trust in the real atonement. What hope then remained for them? Having provoked God, they had no person of authority sufficient to arbitrate between them: and having rejected the only Sacrifice, the only Advocate, the great High-priest, they had none to make atonement for them, they had none to intercede: they must therefore be left to their fate, and reap the bitter fruits of their iniquities. In confirmation of this, God declared that "their sin should not be purged by sacrifice or offering for ever^f."

With this explanation we see at once the force and emphasis of the words before us. They were intended to express the exceeding heinousness of the sins that had been committed, and to deter the offenders from persisting in such fatal conduct. While they intimate the danger to which a violation of human laws will expose us, they insinuate the infinitely greater danger

^e Heb. ix. 25, 26. and x. 1, 4, 14.

^f 1 Sam. iii. 14.

we incur by contemning the only means of forgiveness with God.

With the additional light which the New Testament reflects on this passage, we may see that *we* are as much interested in this admonition, as the very persons were, to whom it was first given: for, though we have not run to their excess of riot, or caused the offering of the Lord to be so abhorred, yet we have too much disregarded the sacrifice of the Son of God. If we have not openly opposed the atonement of Christ, we have been, perhaps still are, too indifferent about it. The censure therefore in the text, how severe soever it may appear, lies in full force against us. To neglect the Saviour is in a most fatal manner to sin against God: it is, at the same time, to provoke the Majesty of heaven, and to reject the only Advocate, the only Propitiation for sin. Hence the Apostle asks with such tremendous energy, “How shall ye escape if ye neglect so great salvation^g?” Which question, both in import and expression, accords with that in our text, “If a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him?”

In this application of the passage we are countenanced by a parallel passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews^h, “If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.” Here the writer states the reason why an apostate from the truth has nothing to expect but wrath and fiery indignation; the reason is the same as in our text; he has turned his back on the sacrifice of Christ, and there will be no other sacrifice for sin to all eternity: there is therefore no hope of salvation for him. The Apostle then adds, “He that despised Moses’ law, died without mercy, under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith

^g Heb. ii. 3.

^h Heb. x. 26—29.

he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite to the Spirit of grace?" Thus may we ask, in reference to the text, If the infraction of human laws, when substantiated by sufficient evidence, be ever punished with the loss of life, how much more shall a neglect and contempt of Christ meet with due recompence from an holy and omniscient God?

The text being thus explained, we may proceed to deduce from it some important observations.

The solemnity of the present occasionⁱ requires us to take some notice of human judicatures: we shall not however restrict our observations to them: there is a future judgment to which we must look forward; nor should we satisfy your expectations any more than our own conscience, if we did not principally advert to that. The text affords us a proper opportunity for discharging our duty in both respects.

We observe then,

- I. *That the dispensing of justice by persons duly qualified and authorized, is an unspeakable blessing to a nation.*

The institution of judges is a necessary part of every well-ordered government. When God called his people Israel, and formed them into a distinct nation by his servant Moses, he gave this command; "Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates which the Lord thy God giveth thee throughout all thy tribes; and they shall judge the people with just judgment^k." When Jehoshaphat set himself to restore the political and religious welfare of his kingdom, he paid immediate attention to this point: "he set judges in the land throughout all the fenced cities of Judah, city by city; and said to the judges, Take heed what ye do; for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in judgment^l." After the Babylonish captivity also, when the Persian monarch gave commandment respecting the *re-establishment* of the Jews in their own land, he particularly enjoined Ezra to be mindful of this matter: "Thou, Ezra,

ⁱ An Assize Sermon at Cambridge.

^k Deut. xvi. 18.

^l 2 Chron. vii. 25, 26.

after the wisdom of thy God that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river: and whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment^m." Indeed, without such an institution, the laws themselves would be altogether vain and useless: the weak would sink under oppression; and the strong tyrannize with impunity. The bonds of society would be broken asunder; and universal anarchy would prevail. We have witnessed the destruction of all constituted authorities, and the utter annihilation of all established laws. We have beheld licentiousness stalking with the cap of liberty, and ferocious despotism, under the name of equality, spreading desolation with an indiscriminating handⁿ. But, blessed be God, it is not thus with Britain: I pray God it never may be. The laws, with us, are respected; and they, who superintend the execution of them, are revered. If one man sin against another, we have judges, who are competent, and not afraid, to judge him. If existing laws are not sufficient to check the progress of conspiracy and treason, we have a legislature, that will deliberate with coolness, and enact with wisdom. If the necessary restraints be violated by presumptuous demagogues, we have magistrates, that will call the offenders to trial; juries, that will bring in their verdict with conscientious truth; and judges, that, while they declare the sentence of the law with firmness, know how to temper judgment with mercy. Yes, to their united efforts, under the care of Providence, we owe it, that faction and sedition have been disarmed of the power, would to God I might also add, the inclination, to disturb the realm.

However the opinions of many were shaken for a time by specious arguments and groundless cavils, there are but few, it is hoped, at this time, whose eyes have not been opened to discern the excellence

^m Ezra vii. 25, 26.

ⁿ At the time of the French Revolution,

of our constitution. Who, that has seen insulted majesty proclaiming pardon to mutiny and sedition; who that, when the contemnors of that pardon were brought to trial, has seen the very judges becoming counsel for the accused; who, that has seen to what an amazing extent lenity has been carried (not from partiality or supineness, as under Eli's administration, but from a love of mercy, and a desire to win the offenders to a sense of duty) who, that reflects how forbearance has been exercised, insomuch that not a single execution even of the most daring traitors took place, till lenient measures absolutely defeated their own ends; who, I say, that has seen these things, must not acknowledge the equity and mildness of our government? And who, that knows the value of such a government, would not uphold it to the utmost of his power?

While we are speaking upon this subject, it is impossible to omit the mention of one, who with unexampled fortitude has stemmed the torrent of iniquity in this country, and has made the most opulent to know, that if they will tempt the chastity of individuals, and destroy the peace of families, they shall do it at their peril. I do not hesitate to say, that every father of a family, and every lover of virtue in this kingdom, stands indebted to him, and has reason to bless God, that such integrity and power are combined in one person^o.

There is one other point worthy to be noticed in the judicatories of this country; I mean, a freedom from political or religious prejudice. If a man be known to disapprove the measures of government, he is not the less likely on that account to obtain justice in any cause in which he may be engaged: if he dissent from the established mode of worship, he is not the less protected in the right of serving God according to his conscience: nor, if on account of superior zeal and piety, he be branded with an ignominious name, will prejudice be suffered to bias

^o The name of Lord Kenyon will necessarily occur to the mind of every reader. He awarded 10,000*l.* damages in a case of adultery.

the decisions of our courts against him. Every member of the community, of whatever denomination or description, is sure to have his cause attentively heard, and impartially determined.

These things cannot but create a love to our constitution in the mind of every man, who rightly appreciates the blessings of civil and religious liberty. And I pray God that the laws of our country may ever continue to be thus respected, and to be thus dispensed.

The observation now made, has been suggested by the first part of Eli's admonition. Another observation we may offer, arising from the obvious connexion which subsists between that and the latter member of the text ; namely,

II. *That there are many things, not cognizable by human laws, which will be brought to trial before the Judge of quick and dead.*

Man's tribunal is erected principally for judging things which particularly affect the welfare of society ; and, in criminal causes, respect is had to actions rather than to thoughts, or at least to actions as the evidences of our thoughts. But at the tribunal of God, every thing which affected the divine government will be brought forward, the sins against God, as well as sins against our fellow-creatures ; the sins of omission, as well as of commission ; the sins of thought and desire, as well as those of purpose and of act. There is not any one action of our lives that will not then be weighed in the balance of the sanctuary ; there is not a word of our lips, which will not then bear its proper stamp of piety, or transgression : there is not so much as a thought of our hearts, that will not receive its just mark of approbation or displeasure. We are expressly told, that " God in that day will judge the secrets of men ; that he will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart ;" and that " he will then reward every man according to what he hath done, whether it be good or evil ;" " to

them, who by patient continuance in well-doing have sought for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life : but to them that were contentious, and obeyed not the truth, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, even upon every soul of man that doeth evil." At that day, we are informed, " the Judge will come in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory;" and he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, even " with the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God." " Then shall the sea give up the dead which were in it, and death and hell deliver up the dead that were in them, and all, small and great, shall stand before God." " The Ancient of days, whose garment is white as snow, and the hair of whose head is like pure wool, will sit upon his fiery throne; and while a fiery stream issues from before him, and ten thousand times ten thousand minister unto him, he will open the booksⁿ; the book of life^o, wherein the names of his people are written; the book of his remembrance^p, wherein the most secret imaginations of men's hearts were registered; the book of conscience too^q, which, however illegible now through our ignorance and partiality, will be found to correspond with his records in every particular; and lastly, the book of his law^r, according to which he will pass his judgment. Ah! who can reflect on the solemnities of that day, and not be filled with awe? Who amongst us can endure so strict a scrutiny? " Who can abide the day of his coming?" We may easily conceive the feelings of a prisoner, who, being to be tried for a capital offence, hears the trumpet announce the coming of his judge. Let us endeavour to realize the thought, and to apply it to our own case. We are sure that such a criminal would lose no time in preparing for his defence. He would engage his counsel, summon his witnesses, and employ every art in order to obtain a favourable sentence. Let us go and do likewise: our " time is

ⁿ Dan. vii. 9, 10.^o Rev. xx. 12.^p Mal. iii. 16.^q Matt. xxii. 12.^r Rom. ii. 12.

short; the Judge is at the door," and if we be unprepared to meet him, woe be unto us; our sentence will be awful indeed: the very terms, in which it will be expressed, are already told us; "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." In one respect indeed we differ widely from such a criminal: if he escape, it must be through want of evidence to convict him: whereas the only way for us to escape is, to confess our guilt, and plead the atonement offered for us by the Son of God.

This leads me to my last observation, namely,

III. *That a neglect of Christ will be found in that day to have been the most fatal of all offences.*

Sins of any other kind, how heinous soever they may have been, yea, though they may have brought us to an ignominious end, may yet be pardoned of our God, provided we turn to him with unfeigned sorrow and contrition, and rely on the atonement which Christ has offered. The Scriptures are extremely full and strong upon this subject. They declare that "all who believe, shall be justified from all things;" that "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin;" that "though our sins be as scarlet they shall be as wool, though they be red like crimson they shall be white as snow." So undoubted is this truth, and so suited to the condition of fallen man, that it has been often and well proclaimed in our very courts of justice; proclaimed, I say, to criminals condemned, at the very time of condemnation, and that too, by those very persons who pronounced the sentence of death against them. Yes, thanks be to God, there are judges, even in this degenerate age, who are not ashamed to unite the balm of Christian counsel with the severity of a penal sentence.

But let us suppose that we have neither violated the laws of man, nor, in any flagrant instances, the laws of God; shall we therefore be acquitted at God's tribunal? Shall we need none to entreat for us,

^s Matt. xxv. 41.

none to plead our cause in that day? May we safely neglect the sacrifice of Christ, because we have abstained from gross iniquities? Let us not deceive ourselves with any such dangerous imagination: "We all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;" "every mouth therefore must be stopped, and all the world must become guilty before God." None can stand upon the footing of his own righteousness. Having transgressed the law, we are cursed by the law; as it is written, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them." We must therefore all, without exception, seek deliverance in Him, "who hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." God has declared that "there is salvation in no other; that there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved, but the name of Jesus Christ:" if we will not "enter by that door," we exclude ourselves from even a possibility of obtaining mercy to all eternity.

I know it will be urged in opposition to this, that we have been free from all gross offences, and have been punctual in the observance of many civil and religious duties. Be it so: but how would such a plea sound in a court of justice? Let a criminal, accused of rebellion against an earthly monarch, plead his allegiance to the King of kings; let him say, "I regarded his sacrifice, I trusted in the atonement, I sought an interest in Christ." Would his plea be valid? Would he not be told immediately, that these things he ought indeed to have done, and not have left the other undone? Thus then we answer those, who go about to establish their own righteousness instead of submitting to the righteousness of God; "It was well that you abstained from gross sin, and fulfilled many duties; but you ought also to have sought redemption through the blood of Christ; you ought to have 'fled for refuge to the hope set before you:' and because you have neglected him, you have no part or lot in his salvation." What can be plainer than our Lord's own assertions, "No man cometh to

the Father but by me;" and, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part in me?" or what can be more awful than that interrogation of St. Peter, "What shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God?" We may venture to put the question to the conscience of every considerate man; If you sin against God in neglecting and despising his dear Son, what atonement will you offer to him? If you make light of the sacrifice offered upon Calvary, where will you find another sacrifice for sin? If you disregard the mediation and intercession of Christ, where will you find another advocate? If you sin thus against God, who shall entreat for you?

Here then the subject wears a very serious and solemn aspect. We all are hastening to "the judgment-seat of Christ, where we must give account of ourselves to God." There, high and low, rich and poor, judges and criminals, must all appear to receive their sentence of condemnation or acquittal; there will be no respect of persons with God: even the criminal who died by the hand of the executioner, provided that his disgraceful circumstances led him to reflection, and made him implore mercy through the blood of Jesus, shall stand a monument of redeeming grace: while his superiors in morality, yea, even the judge who condemned him, if they died in impenitence and unbelief, shall hear the sentence of condemnation pronounced against them, and be doomed to that "second death in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone."

Let us then inquire diligently into the state of our souls: let us "judge ourselves that we be not judged of the Lord." Let us examine what regard we have paid, and are yet daily paying, to the sacrifice of Christ; let us inquire whether "He be all our salvation and all our desire?" And let us remember, that if we would have him to entreat for us in that day, we must now entreat him for ourselves, "desiring earnestly to be found in him, not having our own righteousness, but the righteousness of God which is by faith in him."

CCLXXXIV.

ELI'S UNFAITHFULNESS REPROVED.

1 Sam. ii. 30. *Them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.*

HOWEVER the promises of God may be expressed, they are never so to be understood, as if they should be fulfilled to us whilst we are in a state of wilful sin: there is always in them an implied condition, that we depart from iniquity, and endeavour faithfully to serve the Lord. To Aaron a promise was made, that the priesthood should be continued in his family, and in that of Eleazar his son: yet for some wickedness of his descendants it was transferred from the family of Eleazar, his eldest son, to that of his younger son, Ithamar, from whom Eli was descended. Again the promise was made, that it should be continued in the line of Eli: but, for a similar reason, it was afterwards taken from Abiathar, his descendant, and given to Zadoc, who was of the elder branch. That the promises were to be understood with such limitations, God himself declares in this address to Eli; wherein he tells Eli, that he had rescinded the promise made to him, and determined to act towards him on the broad basis of equity, precisely as he would towards all mankind: "I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed."

Here we may see,

I. What conduct God requires of us—

This will be best learned from a review of the context. Eli being far advanced in age, his sons performed the priestly office in his stead. But they abused their power to such a degree as to "make the offerings of the Lord to be abhorred." Eli heard of their proceedings, and reprov'd them for their

wickedness : but he neglected to exert that authority with which God had invested him ; and manifested more regard for the feelings of his sons, than he did for the honour of his God. This was Eli's fault, and the occasion of God's heavy displeasure against him. From hence then we see what God requires of us : he expects us,

1. To have a supreme regard for his glory—

[The honour of God ought to be dear to every one of us : for though we cannot augment or diminish his essential glory, we may greatly affect the regards of men towards him, and be an occasion of his being either honoured or blasphemed by multitudes around us. In truth, there is not any thing we do, but has considerable influence of this kind. How careful then should we be, and how watchful, not to do any thing which may lower him in the esteem of men! The thought that should be ever uppermost in our minds, is this; "What aspect will such or such conduct have upon religion; and what effect will it produce in advancing or retarding its influence in the world? — — —]

2. To promote it to the utmost of our power—

[To exemplify religion in our own conduct must be our first labour, and to shew all possible respect to every thing that relates to God. His word, his Sabbath, his name, his Gospel, his cause and interest in the world, must be exceeding high in our estimation. But we must not content ourselves with honouring God in our own persons; we must exert all our influence that he may be honoured by all around us. Some are invested with magisterial power; and they must use it for God, and not bear the sword in vain. To others is committed the ministry of the Gospel; and they must boldly reprove sin of every kind, and commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. To others is parental authority intrusted; and they must not content themselves with gently rebuking the wickedness of their children, but must exert themselves to the uttermost to restrain it. Here was Eli's defect. He did well to begin with mild reproof: but he should have proceeded to severer measures, when he saw that they were not to be reclaimed by gentler means. In a word, we should be so intent on advancing the honour of God in the world, as to esteem nothing too much to do, nor any thing too great to suffer, for the attainment of our object: relations, interests, or life itself, should be of no account with us in comparison of this^a.]

^a Luke xiv. 26. with that expression in the verse before the text, "Thou honourest thy sons above me."

Such being the conduct which God requires, let us consider,

II. In what light he will view it—

He will account himself “honoured” by our observance of it—

[Often does he speak to us to this effect: and in what sense we must understand the expression, has been before explained. Though “our goodness cannot extend to him,” or profit “him,” if he esteem himself glorified by it, it is quite sufficient for us: nor can we have any greater stimulus to exertion than such a consideration as this. To form a just estimate of it, let us only reflect on the zeal which is manifested by all the hosts of heaven to honour God: how do they all vie with each other in their songs of praise! And if an opportunity were afforded them to advance his honour by any offices on earth, how readily would they leave their blest abodes, and fly hither to execute his high commands! They are represented as “doing his commandments, and hearkening to the voice of his word,” to obey the first intimation of his will. Such is the zeal that should animate us; and God will assuredly consider himself as glorified by it: indeed he is glorified, inasmuch as our obedience proclaims to all around us, that he is, in our estimation at least, worthy of all the love that we can manifest, and of all the service that we can render him.]

But where such conduct is wanting, God accounts himself treated with contempt—

[Is there no medium between an honouring of God and a despising of him? I answer, No: if he be not honoured, something else is honoured above him, and the creature is set above the Most High God. It is said of Eli, that he “honoured his sons above God:” and this was considered by God as an instance of direct and absolute contempt. The same is true respecting every act of disobedience, and every neglect of duty; which necessarily implies an attention to our own ease, interest, or pleasure, in preference to the will of God. What a contempt of the Divine Majesty does it argue, when we resist his will! What a contempt of his love and mercy, when we neglect his salvation! What a contempt of his justice, his holiness, and his truth, when we entertain the idea that such conduct can pass with impunity! This is the very construction that God himself puts upon such conduct: “Wherefore doth the wicked *contemn* God, while he doth say in his heart, Thou, God, wilt not require it?”

If then *we*, poor, ignorant, guilty creatures, feel so keenly when we are treated with contempt, let us consider how

indignantly the Most High God will resent such conduct at our hands.]

He himself has told us,

II. What notice he will take of it—

He will honour his faithful and obedient servants—

[This he has promised^b: and he will perform it. Men may treat them as if they were “the filth of the earth and the offscouring of all things;” (though they cannot help reverencing them in their hearts^c:) but God will honour them with the most distinguished tokens of his love. He “will give them a name better than of sons and of daughters,” and will enrich them with the inestimable blessings of grace and peace. *Through their whole lives* he will admit them to the nearest fellowship with himself: and what will he not do for them *in the hour of death*?——Yet all this falls infinitely short of the glory he will confer upon them *in the future world*. Read what testimonies of his approbation he will give them before the assembled universe, and with what honours he will invest them at his own right hand^d: verily they shall never have reason to complain that their fidelity to God has not been adequately rewarded.]

But those who have despised him shall be despised by him—

[Though they may be exalted among men, God will hold them in the utmost contempt. He will not vouchsafe to them so much as one kind look: but, on the contrary, in the hour of their greatest extremity, “he will laugh at their calamity, and mock when their fear cometh.” No consolations will he administer to them in a dying hour; but will rather hide his face from them, and shut his ear at the voice of their cry. And when they stand at his judgment-seat, he will bid them “depart accursed into everlasting fire,” regarding them no more than the chaff that is cast into the oven——They will then indeed “be lightly esteemed;” for they will “awake to shame and everlasting contempt.”]

Here then we may SEE,

1. What estimate we should form of lukewarm religion—

[That religion is most pleasing to men, which is regulated by the opinions of the world: but that alone is acceptable with God, which is agreeable to the standard of his revealed will.

^b John xii. 26.

^c Mark vi. 20.

^d Matt. xxv. 34. Mal. iii. 17.

He requires our whole hearts ; and looks with utter abhorrence upon the lukewarmness of a Laodicean state^e — — — Let us then not be contented with serving God in our closets ; but let us confess him in the world : and let us not only serve him ourselves, but use all our influence to bring others also to a submission to his will. Yea, if all others should determinately reject his yoke, let us say, “ As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”]

2. What alone we are to regard as the great object of our desire—

[“ The honour that cometh of man ” should be no further of any account with us, than it may augment our influence in serving God. It is the honour which cometh of God that alone deserves our concern. To have the witness of his Spirit and the testimony of our own conscience that we are pleasing God, is worthy of our most diligent pursuit. That will comfort us, when all other sources of consolation are cut off. Moreover, the approbation of God will continue, millions of ages after that the breath of man’s applause has vanished away. Let us then *act to* God, and *live for* God, and endeavour so to walk with him, that we may enjoy the light of his countenance: for “ in his favour is life, and his loving-kindness is better than life itself.”]

^e Rev. iii. 15, 16.

CCLXXXV.

ELI’S SUBMISSION TO THE DIVINE REBUKES.

1 Sam. iii. 18. *And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is the Lord : let him do what seemeth him good.*

IT is of the nature of sin to harden the heart, and to prevent the declarations of God from having their due influence on the mind^a. It operates in this manner, wherever it is found : the righteous, no less than the wicked, experience the same effects, in proportion as it gains an ascendant over them. Eli had neglected to exert that authority, which, as God’s high-priest, and as a parent, he ought to have exercised over his abandoned sons : and God sent a prophet to him, “ a man of God,” to reprove him, and

^a Heb. iii. 13.

to warn him of the judgments which his sin would bring both on himself and his posterity^b. But this message seems to have produced no good effect. God therefore used another method of awakening his conscience: he revealed himself to Samuel by an audible voice, and renewed to him the declarations, that had been before made in vain. The voice was new to Samuel; and, taking it for Eli's voice, he repeatedly attended on the aged priest: but when, according to the direction of Eli, he had requested the further manifestation of God's will, he received from God the communication he desired. It does not appear that he would of himself have imparted to Eli the information he had received: but when adjured to it by Eli himself, he could not refrain.

The points for our present consideration are,

I. The fidelity of Samuel—

[The tidings were of a most dreadful nature: and to deliver them must have been a distressing office to Samuel. But Samuel was not elated by the revelation that had been made to him; nor was he hasty to denounce the judgments which he was commissioned to declare^c; yet on the other hand, when he was solemnly called upon to disclose the whole, he would not dissemble, nor conceal any thing; but related to Eli every minute particular.

In this we have an excellent model for God's servants in every age. They should deliver only what they themselves have received from God: nor, in delivering that, should they delight to denounce the judgments of God, or exult over those whom they are constrained to condemn: yet they should, with becoming fidelity, "declare the whole counsel of God:" they should "keep back nothing that can be profitable" to those to whom they are sent; but should "commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."

The consciousness of their own youth or weakness should not keep them from discharging their duty aright: they should declare the whole truth to all, whether old or young, professors or profane: "Having received God's word, they must speak his word faithfully^d."

Whilst we approve of the fidelity of Samuel, we must also of necessity admire,

^b 1 Sam. ii. 27—35.

^c Jer. xvii. 16.

^d Jer. xxiii. 28.

II. The resignation of Eli—

[If the tidings were painful to Samuel to deliver, much more must they be so to Eli to hear: even to persons far less interested than he, they were sufficient to make “their ears to tingle.” Yet Eli did not set himself against them, though delivered by a child: on the contrary, he submitted to the divine decree with humble resignation. He knew that God was too wise to err, and too good to inflict punishment without a cause. He knew also that he himself had sinned against the Lord, and well deserved the judgments that had been denounced against him. Hence the language of his heart was, “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him^e.”

This shews how we should receive all the denunciations of God’s wrath against sin. We should not “puff at them,” or harden ourselves against them, or think unkindly of those who set them before us; we should not with Pharisaic pride exclaim, “In so saying thou reproachest us:” but whatever God says in his word, by whomsoever it may be delivered, we should “receive it, not as the word of man, but as the word of God,” precisely as much as if it had been spoken to us by an audible voice from heaven. Eternal judgments indeed we may deprecate, yea and ought to deprecate, with all our might: and even temporal calamities we may deprecate *in submission to God*: we may entreat him to remove the bitter cup, as fervently as we will, provided we add, “Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done:” but we must acknowledge the justice of God even in his severest judgments, and be contented that our temporal happiness should be destroyed, if only “our spirits may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus^f.”]

From this subject we may further LEARN,

1. The importance of exerting our influence for God—

[Eli had neglected to punish his sons for their great impieties: he had reproved them indeed; but when he found the inefficiency of lenient reproofs, he had neglected to adopt severer measures. This was the sin which excited God’s displeasure against him, and occasioned the utter ruin of his whole family. How strongly does this apply to every individual amongst us! and how urgently does it call upon us to exert our influence, whatever it may be, for God! Let us not say, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” If others are bold in the service of the devil, we should be bold in the service of our God: “we must in any wise reprove our brother, and not suffer sin upon him.” Our influence is as much a talent as our time, or money, or

^e Mic. vii. 9.

^f 1 Cor. v. 5.

any thing else ; and we ought to use it for God. We should not be contented to go to heaven alone, but should endeavour to carry all we can along with us.]

2. The comfort of being interested in the Gospel of Christ—

[There were many sins for which the Mosaic dispensation provided no sacrifice : and God himself warned Eli, that “the iniquity of his house should never be purged by sacrifice or offering, to the end of time.” But no such declaration is made to us under the Gospel: there is not a word in all the Bible that even hints at the insufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice to atone for the greatest guilt, or the doubtfulness of any person’s acceptance, provided he plead that sacrifice as the ground of his hopes. We are told indeed, that, “if a man sin wilfully (*in rejecting that sacrifice*) after he has received the knowledge of the truth, there remains *no other sacrifice*, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation^g :” but to those who penitently trust in that sacrifice there is no ground of despondency. Whatever then our sins may have been, let us remember, that the death of Christ was “a propitiation for the sins of the whole world ;” that “his blood is able to cleanse us from all sin ;” and that “though our sins be red as crimson, they shall through him be made white as snow.” Let this comfort us under every desponding apprehension ; and whilst, with Eli, we commit the entire disposal of all events into the hands of a righteous God, let us cast ourselves with confidence on his promised mercy, and “hold fast the rejoicing of our hope firm unto the end.”]

^g Heb. x. 26, 27.

CCLXXXVI.

ELI'S ANXIETY FOR THE ARK OF GOD.

1 Sam. iv. 13. *Lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching : for his heart trembled for the ark of God.*

THE word of God, to whatever it relate, shall certainly in due time be accomplished : it may indeed, like the seed under the clods, appear to have been lost : but as soon as the appointed season arrives, we shall be made to see, that not a jot or tittle of God’s word can ever fail. It had some years before been announced to Eli, that God would bring such judgments upon his house as should make

“the ears of every one that heard of them to tingle.” Now the time for the execution of the threatening drew nigh; and the manner in which it was executed is set before us. The Philistines had gained a victory over Israel, and had slain about four thousand men. The elders of Israel, astonished at such an event, devised an expedient for securing, as they hoped, a successful issue to the contest. They sent to Shiloh for the ark of God; which accordingly was brought by Hophni and Phinehas into the camp. Eli, at the advanced age of ninety-eight, being informed of the measure that had been adopted, anticipated in his mind the evils that were at hand; and full of anxiety, “sat by the wayside, watching; for his heart trembled for the ark of God.”

We propose to consider,

I. The grounds of his anxiety—

Eli did not doubt whether God *was able* to protect his ark; but he had just grounds to doubt whether he *would* protect it—

[He knew the wicked state of the people at large, and of his sons in particular— — He knew that the measure which had been adopted, had not been commanded or authorized by God— — — He knew that if the ark should be taken, the loss would be incalculable— — — He knew that in the event of such a misfortune, the Philistines would profanely exult over the God of Israel — — —]

And if on these grounds he trembled for the ark, is there not reason to tremble for the cause of God in many parts of the Christian world?

[Of the wickedness of merely nominal Christians it is almost superfluous to speak. Let us turn our attention rather to those whose office it is to bear the ark and to minister before it; how many of them, alas! walk unworthy of their high calling! Or let us look to those who profess to regard the ark of God, and to expect salvation from a Covenant God in Christ: do we not behold amongst them many by whom God is habitually and grievously dishonoured? Are there not many too, who, under a sense of their guilt and danger, devise expedients which were never sanctioned by the Lord, and resort to them for salvation, in an utter neglect of those means which have been revealed by God? What have all such persons reason to expect, but that God, who has long since departed

from the Churches of Asia, and from innumerable other Churches which once enjoyed the light of his Gospel, should "remove his candlestick" from them? And what if such a judgment should be inflicted upon us? How would those who hate the light exult, and the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph! Truly, if we viewed the state of the Christian world aright, there is scarcely a people for whom we have not cause to tremble, lest they should lose the privileges which they are so backward to improve, and be delivered up into the hands of their spiritual enemies. And "woe unto them when God departs from them^a!"

Commendable as the anxiety of Eli was, we cannot be surprised at,

II. The issue of it—

[The Israelites were defeated: no less than thirty thousand of them perished: the sons of Eli, the priests who bore the ark, were slain: and the ark itself was taken. The awful tidings soon reached the ears of Eli. He heard of Israel's defeat, and bowed with meek submission; as he did also when he was informed of the death of both his sons: but when he was told that the ark of God was taken, he fainted, he fell, he died.

Now in this death he may appear to have resembled the wicked Israelites: but there was in truth a great difference between them. His death indeed was in part judicial, and so far may be compared with theirs: but theirs was accompanied with manifest tokens of the divine displeasure; and we have reason to fear that not they only, but Hophni and Phinehas also, were cut off in their sins. But Eli shewed his supreme regard for God; and in some sense died a martyr to his love to God. The wife of Phinehas also evinced the same piety. She was so affected with the tidings, that her pangs of travail were prematurely hastened; and, when her attendants strove to comfort her with the information that she had borne a son, she no further noticed it than to give him the name of I-chabod, which means *inglorious*; assigning as the reason for it, that "the glory was departed from Israel, and the ark of God was taken^b." Thus did she, and Eli, manifest, that a concern for the honour of God was deeply rooted in their minds, more deeply than any other consideration, whether of public interest or of the ties of consanguinity.

We congratulate then this aged priest on the issue of his anxiety: and we rejoice, that, when his errors in life had subjected him to the divine displeasure, he shewed in his death

^a Hos. ix. 12. with Josh. vii. 6—9. and Neh. i. 3, 4.

^b ver. 19—22.

that he had obtained mercy of the Lord. Had we not been informed of this closing scene, we might have doubted how far the judgments of God might come upon him in the eternal world: but, with this knowledge of his latter end, we feel no doubt of his acceptance with God, and his exaltation to the realms of bliss.]

This whole history is very instructive: it TEACHES US,

1. The inefficacy of ordinances—

[As the Israelites idolized the ark, and looked to it as a saviour in the place of God, so do many look to the ordinances of religion, (as though there were in them a power to save,) instead of looking through them to the God of ordinances. But, though Paul should plant or Apollos water, it is God alone that can give the increase: and if we put the word, or ministers, or sacraments, or any thing else in the place of God, we shall find them to be a lamp without oil, and “a fountain sealed.”]

2. The danger of presumption—

[The Israelites hoped for the divine protection, though they humbled not themselves for their iniquities, nor even in earnest implored his help; yea, they shouted for joy as though a victory were already gained. But it is in vain to indulge such an hope as this. If we turn not from our sins, it is not possible but that we must be overtaken by the divine judgments. For the truth of this, God himself refers us to the history before us: “Go,” says he, “and learn what I did to Shiloh, for the wickedness thereof.”]

3. The necessity of walking in the fear of God—

[We know not how soon, or how suddenly, death may come upon us. Even if our lives be prolonged to an advanced age, we may yet be taken off without a moment’s warning. How desirable then is it that all, and especially those who are drawing nigh to the time of childbirth, should stand ready for death and judgment! It is not necessary, nor indeed desirable, that we should be living under a servile dread of death; but we should be “working out our salvation with *fear and trembling*.” We should be “trembling for the ark of God;” longing to hear of the victories of Christ in the world, and dreading to hear of the triumphs of his enemies. We should particularly “watch,” to see the progress of his grace in our own souls, and fear lest by any means he should be dishonoured through us. If that be our frame of mind, we shall be accepted of God both in life and death: for the declaration of God himself is this, “Blessed is the man that feareth always.”]

^c Compare Ps. lxxviii. 58—64. with Jer. vii. 12.

CCLXXXVII.

THE ARK RETURNED TO BETH-SHEMESH.

1 Sam. vi. 20. *And the men of Beth-shemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?*

TILL we come to behold some extraordinary interposition of the Deity, we have in general a very slight sense of his majesty and greatness: but when we see any remarkable display of his power, we are apt to forget all his other perfections, and to think of him with insupportable terror. We have a striking instance of this in the Israelites, when they saw God's decision of their controversy with Aaron on the subject of the priesthood: "They said, Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish: whosoever cometh any thing near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die: shall we be consumed with dying^a?" Thus, in the passage before us, the men of Beth-shemesh, who had just before manifested so little respect for the Lord as to treat his ark with impious irreverence, no sooner felt the tokens of his displeasure than they exclaimed, "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?"

We propose to consider,

I. The grounds and occasions of this question—

To understand it aright, we must consult the whole of this and of the preceding chapter.

God had prevailed over the idolatrous Philistines—

[God had, for the punishment of his offending people, delivered the ark into the hands of their enemies: and the Philistines having triumphed, as they imagined, over the God of Israel, placed the ark, as a trophy, in the temple of Dagon their god. They had before "offered a great sacrifice to Dagon, when, as they supposed, he had delivered Samson into their hand^b:" and now they endeavoured to do him still greater honour, by placing, as they imagined, the God of Israel at his feet. But behold, their God, without any visible cause, fell prostrate before the ark; and, when set up again in his place, again, the very next night, fell down before the ark,

^a Numb. xvii. 12, 13.

^b Judg. xvi. 23, 24.

having both his head and his hands broken from the trunk. Should they not have learned from this that their idol had neither wisdom nor power to effect any thing^e?

But when they would not understand from this sign the superiority of the God of Israel, Jehovah smote multitudes of them with a pestilence, of which they died; and multitudes also with emerods (which are supposed to be a very grievous kind of *piles*^d); insomuch that they were constrained to acknowledge that "his hand was sore upon them, and upon Dagon their god^e." Wearied with their sufferings, they sent the ark to Gath: but there the same judgments were inflicted on the people, both small and great: so that they got it removed to Ekron; where the people were terrified at the prospect of experiencing the like calamities, and soon united in the general wish for its dismissal from their country. Another judgment also which God inflicted on them contributed to make them anxious to restore the ark without delay, and to appease the wrath of him whose symbol it was: their country was suddenly overrun with mice, which destroyed all the fruits of the earth. A consultation therefore was held by all the priests and diviners, to ascertain the best method of testifying their sorrow for the indignities offered to Jehovah: the result of which was, to send back the ark, with representations in gold both of the mice and of the emerods, five in number, one for each of the lords who ruled the country, and who were therefore fit representatives of the whole people.

But in their mode of executing this they shewed how reluctant they were to part with the ark, or to acknowledge Jehovah's power. They put the ark on a cart, and yoked two milch kine to it, and left them to go whither they would; taking care however to shut up their calves at home, that, if they should, contrary to all their natural inclinations, go directly to the way of Beth-shemesh, it might be evident, beyond all possibility of doubt, that they were constrained to do so by the invisible power of Jehovah^f.

In all this, however, God glorified himself, and shewed that the whole creation was subject unto him, and that He alone was "God over all the earth^g."]

He had punished also his own presumptuous people—

[The men of Beth-shemesh received the ark, as it became them, with joy and gratitude; and immediately offered the kine a burnt-offering to the Lord. But soon they lost that reverence which they had been ever taught to feel towards that

^e 1 Sam. v. 1—5.

^d See Ps. lxxviii. 65, 66.

^e 1 Sam. v. 6, 7, 11, 12.

^f 1 Sam. vi. 1—11.

^g 1 Sam. vi. 12.

symbol of Jehovah, and with impious curiosity looked into the ark, which was not so much as to be seen by any except the high-priest, and by him only once in the year. For this profane conduct God smote the men of Beth-shemesh, even "fifty thousand and threescore and ten men," or, as it probably should rather be read, "fifty out of a thousand, even threescore and ten men." Terrified at this judgment, especially as connected with all the judgments that had been inflicted on the Philistines, the men of Beth-shemesh were as desirous to get rid of the ark, as ever the Philistines themselves had been. Instead of humbling themselves before him for their *sin*, they thought only of their *punishment*; and were willing rather to part with Jehovah himself, than to conciliate his favour by suitable humiliation.]

Such were the grounds of this desponding question. We now proceed to state,

II. The answer to be given to it—

Whatever reason for despondency there was in their apprehension, there was none in reality.

Doubtless the wicked can never stand before God—

[God is a holy Being, that "cannot look upon iniquity" without the utmost abhorrence of it. *The profane sinner*, however he may "contemn God," and "puff at his judgments," will have far other thoughts of God when once he begins to feel, either in his body or in his mind, the effects of his displeasure. Behold, how changed was the voice of Nebuchadnezzar, when he recovered from the malady which God had inflicted on him^h! and what a contemptible "*god*" did Herod appear, when worms were devouring his vitalsⁱ! Or look at Belshazzar, with his knees smiting together at the sight of the hand-writing on the wall^k; or at Felix, when Paul "reasoned with him of righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come^l:" how little were these persons able to stand before the Majesty of heaven! And shall it be thought, that when they shall be summoned before his tribunal in the last day, they will be able to make good their cause? No: they will wish for rocks and mountains to fall upon them and to "cover them from the wrath of the Lamb." Now they may justify themselves, and condemn the righteous; but in that day, we are assured, "The ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous^m."

Nor will *the presumptuous and disobedient professor* stand

^h Dan. iv. 30, 34, 35.

ⁱ Acts xii. 21—23.

^k Dan. v. 6.

^l Acts xxiv. 25.

^m Ps. i. 5.

before God: for “not every one that saith unto Christ, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of our Father which is in heaven.” Men may plead that they have eaten and drunk in his presence, and done many wonderful works in his name; but the Lord Jesus will say to them, “Depart from me; I never knew you, ye workers of iniquityⁿ.”

O that every sinner would consider this; and that every professor of religion would search and try his ways! — — —]

But the true believer has no cause to dread his presence—

[Even the removal of the judgments from the penitent Philistines is sufficient to shew that God delighteth in mercy, and that “judgment is his strange act,” to which he is greatly averse. But there are numberless promises made to the believer, promises which may “embolden him to enter into the holiest with the blood of Jesus” in his hand, just as the high-priest, on the day of annual expiation, entered with the blood of his sacrifices within the veil. Though he is in himself a guilty and corrupt creature, in Christ he stands before God without spot or blemish^o: yea, “though his sins have been red as crimson, they are washed away, and he is made white as snow.” Let him only be steadfast in the faith, and he has nothing to fear^p. Whilst he shews forth his faith by his works, he may expect to enjoy that “peace of God which passeth all understanding^q,” and especially, whilst he is filled with love, and therein bears the image of his God, he may look forward to the day of judgment with confidence and joy^r — — — Know then, Believer, that “in Christ you may have boldness and access with confidence unto the Father by the faith of Christ^s,” and that in due time you shall “be presented faultless before him with exceeding joy^t.”]

OBSERVE then, from this subject,

1. How great an enemy to our welfare is slavish fear!

[What might not the Philistines and the Beth-shemites have obtained, if, instead of sending the ark from them through slavish terror, they had humbled themselves before it, and sought mercy of the Lord? But so it is with persons who are filled with slavish fear; they wish to banish that which inspires them with terror, rather than to part with their sin, which

ⁿ Matt. vii. 21—23. Luke xiii. 25—27.

^o Eph. v. 27.

^p Heb. iii. 6. 1 John ii. 28.

^q Heb. vi. 11. Isai. xxxii. 17.

^r 1 John iii. 18—21. and iv. 16, 17. ^s Eph. iii. 12.

^t Jude, ver. 24.

alone makes God an object of dread. Hence they will resort to any thing for peace, rather than to God himself, who alone can give them peace. But let this be a fixed principle in our minds; that, whatever judgments we either feel or fear, we will not entertain hard thoughts of God. Let us bear in mind, that he is infinitely more willing to give than we are to ask; and that those who "come to him in the name of Jesus he will in no wise cast out."]

2. What a comfort to the soul is the knowledge of Christ!

[The dissolution of the world, and the coming of Christ to judgment, have nothing in them terrific to the true believer. He has a refuge, and an hiding-place; yea "Christ himself is to him a sanctuary," where he is hid from the fear of evil" — — — O that we did but cultivate this knowledge more! Christ is the true ark, which contains that law that was fulfilled by him, and is covered by the mercy-seat, from whence mercy is dispensed to all his believing people. Into that ark we may look; not indeed with unhallowed curiosity, but with an humble desire to understand all the mysteries of redemption. The cherubim that overshadowed the mercy-seat intimate to us, not only what the angels in heaven are doing, (for they are constantly endeavouring to look into this mystery^x;) but what we also should do. St. Paul, after preaching Christ for twenty years, still pressed forward for a further knowledge of him; and with the same view we also should be "searching the Scriptures which testify of him." This is a knowledge in comparison of which all things else are as dung and dross^y: and the more we attain of it, the more shall we be transformed into his image^z, and be rendered meet for the glory which he has prepared for us^a.]

^u Isai. xlv. 17.

^x 1 Pet. i. 12.

^y Phil. viii. 7—10.

^z 2 Cor. iii. 18.

^a Col. i. 12.

CCLXXXVIII.

SAMUEL'S SUCCESSFUL INTERCESSION.

1 Sam. vii. 8, 9. *And the children of Israel said to Samuel, Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, that he will save us out of the hand of the Philistines. And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt-offering wholly unto the Lord: and Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel; and the Lord heard him.*

THERE is scarcely a more striking instance of reformation to be found in all the Holy Scriptures,

than in the chapter before us. The people of Israel had long been in a state of awful departure from God. They had presumptuously confided in the ark at a former period, as though its very presence was sufficient to secure them the victory over the most powerful enemies^a: but now, though it had been restored to their country twenty years, no one had shewn any just regard to it. We may well suppose, however, that Samuel had not been idle: indeed we apprehend that the general reformation which took place at this time, was the fruit of his labours. Availing himself of the deep impression which had been made on the minds of the whole nation, he proposed to meet all the elders of Israel at Mizpeh, with a view to keep a fast unto the Lord. This measure was adopted: but the Philistines, imagining that the collecting of so many persons at one place was with a view to combine for military purposes, took the alarm, and determined to make an assault on them, before they should be able to arrange their plans, and prepare themselves for the battle. The approach of the Philistines produced great consternation at Mizpeh, and necessitated the Israelites to stand on their defence. But, conscious of their incapacity to resist their foes, they besought Samuel to intercede with God for them. His intercession is the subject which we propose for our present consideration; and we shall notice it,

I. As solicited by them—

They had now learned by experience that God alone could help them—

[They did not, as formerly, resort to the ark for aid: nor did they confide in an arm of flesh: Jehovah himself was now their hope: and they sought him in a manner that was truly becoming: “they lamented after him,” being grieved at their hearts that they had provoked him to depart from them: they “drew water, and poured it out before him,” expressing thereby the depth of their sorrow^b: and “they fasted,” in order to beget in themselves a more penitent sense of all their transgressions.

^a 1 Sam. iv. 3—5.

^b Ps. xxii. 14.

In this frame of mind they betook themselves to him, whose power had so often proved effectual for their support.]

But, conscious of their own unworthiness, they sought with all earnestness the intercession of Samuel—

[Very striking is their address to him; “Cease not to pray unto God for us.” They were persuaded that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man would avail much.” Hence they entreated Samuel to intercede for them. But they remembered that the intercession of Moses against Amalek was no longer successful than whilst his hands were held up in prayer; and therefore they importuned Samuel not to suspend for a moment his cries to God in their behalf. Happy were they in having such an intercessor; and happy in having an heart to acknowledge his worth, and to seek his aid.]

Let us next attend to the intercession,

II. As offered by him—

He offered to the Lord a burnt-offering—

[Though Samuel was not a priest, he officiated as a priest on this occasion, and was doubtless accepted of God in that service. The presenting of a sucking lamb upon the altar intimated that neither the people nor himself could approach unto God, or hope for any mercy at his hands, but through that great Sacrifice which should one day be offered, even that Lamb of God which should take away the sins of the whole world. At the same time, as a burnt-offering, it was intended to honour God, who had so often succoured them in the hour of need. This affords an important hint to us in all our addresses at the throne of grace: we must implore mercy solely through the sacrifice of Christ, and acknowledge God's perfections as glorified, in all his dispensations, whether of mercy or of judgment, of providence or of grace — — —]

This sacrifice he accompanied with fervent prayer—

[Samuel well knew, that as prayer without a sacrifice would be of no avail, so neither would a sacrifice without prayer. He therefore “*cried unto the Lord.*” O what is intimated in that expression! what humility, what fervour, what importunity! Such is the prayer that God requires; and such prayer, offered in dependence on our great Sacrifice, shall never go forth in vain^c.]

The efficacy of his intercession will be seen, if we notice it,

^c Ps. l. 15.

III. As accepted of the Lord—

Instantly did God vouchsafe to answer it—

[Before the offering of the lamb was finished, God's acceptance of the prayer was manifest. The Philistines approached to the battle; but were so intimidated and confounded by thunder and lightning, that they fell an easy prey to those whom they had expected utterly to destroy. Thus the intervention of God was seen in the clearest light. Had the victory been gained solely by the sword of Israel, they might have ascribed it to their own skill and prowess: but when it arose from causes that were entirely out of the reach of men, they could not but acknowledge that God himself had interposed in answer to the prayer of Samuel. Signal as this favour was, we are warranted to expect a similar acceptance of our prayers, if only we ask in humility and faith. Jehoshaphat obtained a similar answer under circumstances precisely similar^d: and with equal speed was Daniel answered, when praying for himself^e: and we also shall be heard in like manner, if we draw nigh to God, as it is both our privilege and our duty to do^f.]

He answered too to the utmost extent of the petitions offered—

[Deliverance out of the hands of the Philistines was the mercy asked; and so entirely was this deliverance effected, that the Philistines never came again into the land of Israel as long as Samuel lived.

We too may expect that God will exceed our utmost requests. If we are straitened at all, it is not in him, but in ourselves. If we were more earnest, and more enlarged in prayer, our blessings would be proportionably multiplied^g.]

We may LEARN from hence,

1. On what our safety *as a nation* rests—

[We should imitate their repentance—reformation—faith—and zeal—and should unite, both ministers and people, in committing our cause to God — — —]

2. How our safety *as individuals* is to be secured—

[There is no other way for individuals than for nations: only in nations the mercies of God may be enjoyed by those who have been at no pains to seek them; whereas every individual must stand or fall according to his own exertions in the ways of penitence and faith.]

^d 2 Chron. xx. 21, 22.

^e Dan. ix. 19—23.

^f Isai. lxxv. 24.

^g 2 Kings xiii. 19. Eph. iii. 20.

CCLXXXIX.

MEMORIALS OF GOD'S GOODNESS.

1 Sam. vii. 12. *Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.*

THERE is in the generality of men a very culpable inattention to the ways of Providence. A variety of dispensations succeed each other without ever attracting their notice. Hence they are unconscious of any kindness exercised towards them; and are ready to ascribe their success to themselves, or even to chance, rather than to God. But, if they would observe the many strange and unforeseen events which arise, and notice how they concur to promote their welfare, they would "understand the loving-kindness of the Lord," and be constrained to acknowledge his wise and gracious agency.

The veil with which modern occurrences are covered, is, in the Scriptures, removed; and we see "the holy arm of the Lord made bare." We at this day should regard a storm as a mere accidental thing, common perhaps at the time of year; and think little of God, "who maketh the clouds his chariots, and his ministers a flame of fire." But, in the passage before us, the victory gained by means of a storm is ascribed to the merciful interposition of Jehovah. By means of thunder which terrified the Philistine army, the unprepared Israelites were enabled to destroy them, and to break the power of those who for twenty years had grievously oppressed them: nor was it a little remarkable, that this victory was gained upon the very spot where, twenty years before, God had delivered both them and the ark in which they vainly trusted, into the hands of the Philistines. To commemorate the goodness of the Lord, "Samuel set up a stone, which he called Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

From these words we shall take occasion to shew,

I. What reason *we* have to erect similar memorials—

Whether the agency of God be more or less visible, it is certain that not so much as a sparrow falls to the ground without his special direction. Let us then take a view of the mercies he has vouchsafed to us. These have been,

1. Public—

[These have been exceeding great^a — — — and they demand our devoutest acknowledgments.]

2. Private—

[We shall find abundant cause of thankfulness, if we survey our *temporal* mercies. How are we indebted to God for *life*, when multitudes have been taken into the eternal world; and for *health*, when many have been pining away with sickness, or racked with acute disorders! What an unspeakable mercy is it that our *reason* is continued to us, when many are bereft of this noble faculty, and thereby reduced, like Nebuchadnezzar, to a level with the beasts! What do we owe to God, if we have found *comfort in our relatives* and connexions, (for “it is God that maketh men to be of one mind in a house,”) and if death has not been permitted to rob us of those, in whose welfare we are deeply interested! Perhaps during the preceding year we have entered into *new connexions*, or had our *families enlarged*. Perhaps our *business* has *prospered*; or the *difficulties* with which we have contended, have been *overcome*. In all these things we ought to acknowledge the hand of God, and to think how highly favoured we have been above myriads of our fellow-creatures.

But if we turn our thoughts to the contemplation of our *spiritual* mercies, what ground shall we find for the liveliest gratitude, and the profoundest adoration! That *the ordinances of the Gospel* are continued to us, when, for our misimprovement of them “our candlestick might so justly have been removed;” what a blessing is this! If we only consider that the preached Gospel is, though not the only, yet the principal mean which God makes use of for the salvation of men, we never can be sufficiently thankful that its sound has reached

^a Those specified at the close of the year 1804, were, our long-continued preservation from foreign invasion, or domestic tumults, or even the sound of war; as also our freedom from pestilences, earthquakes, and hurricanes, which had recently committed dreadful ravages in Spain, America, and the West Indies. But these things must of course be varied, according to the occasion on which the subject is used, whether it be *Victory*, or *Peace*, or any other signal mercy.

our ears, and its light been exhibited before our eyes; "for many prophets and kings have in vain desired to see and hear these things," which we so richly enjoy.

We have all, more or less, been made the subjects of *restraining grace*: and O, what a tribute of praise does that demand! How many of our fellow-creatures have brought themselves to an untimely end, either by their excesses, or by the hands of the public executioner! How many unhappy females protract a miserable existence by the wages of prostitution! How many, either to conceal their shame, or to avenge a quarrel, have committed murder! How many, to rid themselves of their present troubles, have madly rushed on suicide! Whence is it, I would ask, that we have not fallen into one or other of these evils? Are we made of better materials than they? "Have we not all one father?" Did *they*, previous to the commission of their evil deeds, imagine themselves more likely to fall than we? Let us acknowledge "the good hand of God upon us:" it is God who alone has made us to differ: and if he had not preserved us by his *restraining grace*, we should at this moment have been numbered with the most miserable and abandoned of the human race.

Some amongst us, we trust, have been made to experience *converting grace*. And what cause for thankfulness have *they*! Look around, and see how few even of those who statedly hear the Gospel are savingly converted by it! What then do *they* owe to God, who have been quickened from the dead; who have had their sins blotted out by the blood of Jesus; who have been made partakers of a divine nature, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven! Should not they raise an Eben-ezer to the Lord?

Nor have *they* less cause for thankfulness who have received *establishing grace*. Consider how many have "begun to run well, and afterwards been hindered:" some waxing cold in their regard to religion; others "turning aside to vain jangling;" some drawn into infidelity; and others making religion itself hateful and abominable, by their hypocrisy or open impiety. Never does a year pass, but some instances of grievous backsliding occur, to the great dishonour of God, and the grief of all his people. And why are not *we* the persons that have been left to fall? Have we felt no secret inclination to sin? Have we on no occasion yielded to the suggestions of our great adversary, so that nothing but Omnipotence, snatching us like brands out of the burning, could have preserved us? Have we never inwardly backslidden, so that if God had not for his own mercy's sake restored us, we must have departed for ever? Let us only examine the records of our own hearts, and call our own ways to remembrance; and there is not one of us who will not be ready to look upon

himself as the greatest monument of mercy that can be found on earth.

Whether then we consider our temporal or our spiritual mercies, we cannot but find unbounded occasion to raise grateful memorials to the Lord our God.]

But it will be proper to shew,

II. In what manner we should do it—

External and visible monuments are very proper expressions of national gratitude: but, as individuals, we must erect very different memorials;—

1. We must get a sense of God's goodness engraven on our hearts—

[We need not to form inscriptions on stone or brass: we are concerned rather to have the mercies of our God written upon our hearts. But here is our great fault: we do not “keep his great goodness in remembrance:” we “forget him at the sea, even at the Red Sea.” One single calamity will call forth complaints in abundance: but ten thousand mercies are scarcely sufficient to raise the soul to God, or to excite one desire to requite his love. Sensible of this, David stirred up his soul to the performance of its duty: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and let all that is within me bless his holy name: bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” It is in this way that we must raise memorials to God: and such memorials he will not despise. One grateful and devout acknowledgment is a more pleasing sacrifice to him than the cattle upon a thousand hills: “Whoso offereth him praise, glorifieth him.”]

2. We must endeavour to impress others also with a sense of it—

[This is a method of perpetuating the remembrance of his goodness, which the Lord himself has prescribed^b. And the more sensible we ourselves are of his kindness to us, the more shall we exert ourselves to preserve the knowledge of it in this way. How admirable is the example of David in this particular! He seems to have laboured with all his might, not merely to praise God with his own lips, but to interest all, whether of his own or future generations, in the same blessed employment^c. On the contrary, how severely was Hezekiah rebuked for ostentatiously displaying his own riches, when he should have been magnifying to the Babylonish ambassadors the Lord's goodness, and commending to them the knowledge

^b Ps. lxxviii. 5—7.

^c Ps. cxlv. 1—7.

of the God of Israel^d! It is possible enough that he might pretend to give God the glory; but God, who knew his heart, saw that he was lifted up with pride: so we are in danger of erecting memorials rather for our own honour, than for God's: but we must be exceeding jealous upon this head, lest, instead of pleasing, we offend the Majesty of heaven; and lest, instead of bringing a blessing upon ourselves, we entail a curse. We may boast; but our boast must be of God, and not of ourselves: we may raise monuments; but they must be truly "Eben-ezers," ascribing every thing to "the Lord's help," and not to an arm of flesh.]

3. We must testify our sense of it by an increased devotion to his service—

[If we are sincere in our acknowledgments, we shall be inquiring, "What shall I render to the Lord, for all the benefits that he hath done unto me?" The end for which our God vouchsafes his mercies to us, is, that we may bring forth fruit to his glory: and, if he find that all his pains and culture are without effect, he will cut us down as "cumberers of the ground^e." Whatever be our character then, we must make this improvement of the Lord's goodness to us: if we are impenitent, it must lead us to repentance; if we are already his servants, it must constrain us to increased diligence in his service, and cause us to abound more and more in every good word and work. We must not satisfy ourselves with empty commendations, crying, "Lord, Lord;" but must do with cheerfulness and delight whatsoever he commands us.]

4. We must trust him in all future difficulties and dangers—

[This is a very principal end of raising memorials of any kind: it is, not merely to remind us of what God has done, but of what he is ever ready to do, if we call upon him. Here again we are called to admire the conduct of David, who regarded the deliverances which he had experienced from the paws of the lion, and of the bear, as arguments for trusting in God, and for expecting a similar deliverance from the sword of Goliath^f. St. Paul also made a similar improvement of the mercies vouchsafed to him; saying, "God hath delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver; in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us^g." Trials will succeed each other, as "clouds coming after rain:" we are not to expect a termination of them, till we are called to our rest above. Yet while on this account we can only say, "*Hitherto* hath the Lord

^d 2 Kings xx. 12—18. with 2 Chron. xxxii. 24, 25, 31.

^e Isai. v. 3—6. Heb. vi. 7, 8. ^f 1 Sam. xvii. 37. ^g 2 Cor. i. 10.

helped us," we may safely commit ourselves into his hands, knowing, that "whoso trusteth in the Lord, shall be even as Mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but standeth fast for ever^h."]]

^h Ps. cxxv. 1.

CCXC.

THE DUTY OF COMMEMORATING GOD'S MERCIES.

1 Sam. vii. 12. *Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.*

The Jews lived under a Theocracy, and received from God a greater number of visible interpositions in their favour than any other nation under heaven. In remembrance of these, many different memorials were erected, and many rites instituted; that so the people might be kept in a steadfast adherence to him as their rightful Sovereign, and in a constant dependence on him as their almighty Protector. But they were ever prone to depart from him, and to transfer their allegiance to the gods of the heathen that were no gods, but idols of wood and stone. For these iniquities that were frequently given up into the hands of their enemies, and left to feel the bitter consequences of their impiety. But, when they were made sensible of their guilt, and brought to humble themselves before God, he returned in mercy to them, and effected for them the deliverance they implored. Such an interposition was obtained for them by the prayers of Samuel; and in remembrance of it was the stone erected, to which my text refers.

But, as God is the Governor of all the earth, and interposes still for his people as really, though not so visibly, as in the days of old, we will not confine our views of this transaction to the particular deliverance to which it primarily refers, but will extend them generally to the Church at large; and consider it as,

I. A commemorative act—

The Jews at this time were grievously oppressed by the Philistines. Samuel called them to repentance, and promised, that, if they would put away their false gods, and return with penitential sorrow to the Lord their God, they should be delivered out of the hands of their enemies. That their return to Jehovah might be the more solemn and universal, Samuel appointed all the heads of the nation to meet him at Mizpeh. But the Philistines, jealous of so large an assemblage of Israelites on the borders of their country, came forth to attack them: and God, in answer to the prayers of Samuel, rescued his people from their hands, and utterly discomfited the Philistine armies. To commemorate this deliverance, Samuel "put up the stone, which he called Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." But, to understand the precise scope of this memorial, we must advert to the means by which the deliverance was obtained. Then we shall see that the stone thus raised, proclaimed, to the whole nation,

1. That God is a hearer of prayer—

[This the people could not but acknowledge, since they all had applied to Samuel to entreat the Lord in their behalf^a. And this was a truth which it was of the utmost importance to commemorate, since it demonstrated Jehovah to be the only true God. To this truth the whole Scriptures bear witness. It was in answer to the cries of Israel that God had formerly delivered them from Egypt, and brought them in safety through the Red Sea. When Amalek came forth against them to destroy them in the wilderness, it was not by the sword of Joshua, but by the prayers of Moses, that Israel obtained the victory: for, when the hands of Moses hanged down, Amalek prevailed; but, in consequence of their being held up until the evening, Israel prevailed, and gained at last a complete triumph. In every part of their history the same truth was manifested^b— — — And to this hour are the memorials of it the greatest possible encouragements to seek for mercy at his hands.]

2. That he will deliver his penitent and believing people—

^a ver. 8.

^b See Ps. cvi. 43, 44. and Ps. cvii. throughout.

[Here we must have an especial eye to the occasion before us. The people, in compliance with the exhortations of Samuel, prayed, and fasted, and confessed their sins, and put away their strange gods, and gave themselves up to Jehovah, "to serve him only^c." This shewed the sincerity of their repentance, without which they could not hope for mercy at God's hands.

But, as humiliation *alone* could be of no avail, Samuel offered a sucking lamb as a burnt-offering to God, thereby acknowledging the people's desert to be utterly consumed, and their hope of acceptance only through a vicarious sacrifice. And it is remarkable, that, as Samuel was in the very act of offering this sacrifice, "God thundered with a great thunder upon the Philistines," and, by the terror which those thunders inspired, caused them to fall an easy prey to the sword of Israel^d.

Thus the people were reminded, that in all their approaches to the throne of grace there must be an union of penitence and faith: and that, whenever they so approached God, they should assuredly be delivered, however great might be the difficulties in which they were involved, or imminent the dangers to which they were exposed.]

But to all future ages also was this memorial intended to convey,

II. An instructive lesson—

It plainly teaches us,

1. That we should often review our past mercies—

[All have received mercies in abundance, which they ought from time to time to review, in order to impress a sense of them the more deeply on their minds. For want of this, how many mercies are forgotten! and what a loss do we sustain by means of our forgetfulness! Blessings that are unnoticed are no more to us than they are to the brute creation: but if we bring them frequently to our remembrance, we have frequently in the retrospect a sweeter taste of them than we had in the actual possession. From this act of Samuel's then let us learn to pass over no mercy without labouring to imprint it on our minds, and to retain the remembrance of it to our dying hour.]

2. That we should especially view the hand of God in them—

[It is this which gives the chief zest to all our mercies.

^c ver. 6.

^d ver. 9—11. A still more glorious testimony he gave to Peter's exhibition of this Lamb of God as crucified for the sins of men. See Acts x. 43, 44.

And to whom can we trace them but to God? Look at your *temporal mercies*; the time, and place of your birth, when the light of the Gospel was shining all around you—your preservation during the helpless state of infancy, which so many myriads of human beings never survive—the many deliverances, seen, and unseen, which you have experienced since—the blessings of health and abundance, whilst so many have spent their days in sickness and want. View but the last year, and see how many have been plunged into deep distress, from which you are exempt; or been called away into the eternal world, whilst you are left with protracted opportunities of working out your salvation — — — Think of your *spiritual mercies*. Have you any measure of light in your minds, of softness in your hearts, of holiness in your lives? Have you any hopes in Christ as your Saviour; any experience of the Spirit as your Comforter; any prospects of heaven, as your inheritance? Think of multitudes around you, or look at those who are gone beyond redemption, and say, whether it is within the power of language to express your obligations to your God. For who is it that has made you to differ? Will you, or can you, trace these blessings to your own superior wisdom, or goodness, or strength? Must you not of necessity acknowledge the hand of God in them, and say, “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us?” Surely in reference to every blessing, whether temporal or spiritual, you must say with David, “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be the praise.”]

3. That we should make our experience of past mercies the ground of expecting all that we can need from God in future—

[Doubtless the memorial raised by Samuel was particularly intended to answer this end. And so should the memorials that are raised in our hearts: “Thou hast been my help; *therefore* under the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice^e.” “*Because* the Lord hath inclined his ear unto me, *therefore* will I call upon him as long as I live^f.” This was St. Paul’s mode of improving past mercies: “God,” says he, “delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver; in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us^g.” From what we have received “*hitherto*,” we know what to expect *henceforth*. O blessed effect of preserving memorials of past mercies in our minds! What holy confidence will it introduce into the soul, and what a happy anticipation even of eternal blessedness! Only let the “Eben-ezer” which Samuel erected teach us this, and we shall ourselves raise in due time a similar memorial in the realms of bliss.]

^e Ps. lxiii. 7.

^f Ps. cxvi. 2.

^g 2 Cor. i. 10.

APPLICATION—

1. Take now a review of all that God has done for you in times past—

[Let those who are yet living as without God in the world contemplate God's forbearance towards them — — — Let those who have been brought out of darkness into the marvellous light of the Gospel survey the riches of divine grace displayed towards them — — — Let believers bring to their remembrance their manifold temptations, their grievous backslidings, their repeated falls; or, if they have been kept from falling, the almost miraculous succours by which they have been upheld — — — Then will the example before us have its due effect; and God will receive the glory due unto his name.]

2. Look forward now to all that you can need from God in times to come—

[Nothing but a sense of our necessities will keep us properly dependent on God. Let your minds then be continually intent on this subject. Think of all you need for body — — — or for soul — — — for time — — — or for eternity — — — And then see what need you have for help from God in future. Yet be not disheartened by the sight of all your necessities; but remember, that however great they be, “God is able to supply all your need out of his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Call to mind the promises of help which God has given you in his word^h; see how ample they are; how repeated; how strong! Though thou art but “a worm,” yet through him “thou shalt thresh the mountains.” In a full persuasion of this, commit your every concern to him, and expect that he will be “a very present help to you in every time of need.” Only trust in him with your whole hearts, and “you shall not be ashamed or confounded world without end.”]

^h Isai. xli. 10—16.

CCXCI.

SAMUEL'S JUDICIAL CHARACTER.

1 Sam. vii. 15—17. *And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places. And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and there he built an altar unto the Lord.*

AS there are times and seasons commended to our special attention on a religious account, so there are

particular occasions which it is proper for us to notice, on account of the interest they create in the public mind, and the facility they afford for imparting instruction suited to them. The pomp with which the judges of the land are surrounded, when they go their circuits for the purpose of dispensing justice through the land, is calculated to make a good impression upon the community at large; and to fill all ranks of men with gratitude to God, for the protection which they enjoy, under the dominion of laws wisely enacted and well administered. We avail ourselves of the opportunity now offered, to set before you the judicial character of Samuel, (than whom there never existed a more diligent or impartial judge,) with a view to trace a parallel between the privileges enjoyed by Israel under his government, and those with which we are favoured in this happy land.

In the prosecution of this subject I will state,

I. The advantages of Israel under the government of Samuel—

Perhaps, amongst all the governors of Israel, there was not one that maintained a more blameless character than Samuel. Indeed, he is distinguished in Scripture as inferior to none, not excepting even Moses himself^a: and in our text, we see how eminent he was,

1. In the administration of justice—

[Though he had all the cares of government upon his hands, yet did he, from year to year, make a circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, in order to take cognizance of the violations of the law, and to decide with equity all the cases that should be brought before him. Now, this was a very great benefit, not to those particular places only, but to all the country round about them: for it tended to uphold the authority of the laws: it gave to all an assurance that their grievances should be redressed, and that those who dared to violate the law should not go unpunished. Thus it conducted to the peace and welfare of society in general, inasmuch as it checked the commission of outrage amongst the lawless, and

^a Ps. xcix. 6. Jer. xv. 1.

gave security to those who were quiet in the land. His knowledge of the laws inspired all with confidence: his known integrity disposed all to a ready acquiescence in his decisions: his authority silenced opposition, where unreasonable selfishness would otherwise have maintained and perpetuated discord: and his taking a circuit, annually, for the express purpose of dispensing justice, facilitated the access of all to his tribunal; when, if he had remained at home, multitudes would have been constrained to go without redress, through an incapacity to bring before him all the witnesses that should be necessary to substantiate their claims.]

2. In the maintenance of true religion—

[Whilst the ark was at Shiloh, he would probably have not felt himself authorized to build an altar at Ramah: but now that it had been many years removed from the Tabernacle, in which, till it was taken by the Philistines, it had been kept—and, consequently, the worship of Jehovah, as appointed in the Law, had been neglected—he, as a prophet of the Most High God, and doubtless by inspiration of God, raised an altar at Ramah, where the seat of government was; and thus proclaimed through the land, that Jehovah, and Jehovah alone, was to be worshipped. To see this in a proper light, we must recollect, that the whole people of Israel had been addicted to idolatry, worshipping everywhere strange gods, even Baalim and Ashteroth^b. For this, God had given them up into the hands of the Philistines for several years; till, upon their repenting and turning to the Lord, he had delivered them by the hands of Samuel. It was under these circumstances that Samuel built an altar to the Lord, that so the people might be kept steadfast to the faith they had received. And this was doubtless a great benefit conferred upon the land; because his example, supported and enforced as it was by his authority, could not fail to deter many from relapsing to idolatry, and to encourage everywhere the worship and the service of the one true God.]

Perceiving, as we now must, how happy that people was under such a governor, we yet are only the better prepared to see,

II. The superior advantages which we enjoy under our government—

We will mark this in both of the preceding particulars: for it is certain that we far, very far, excel them,

^b 1 Sam. vi. 3, 4.

1. In our legal proceedings—

[We have an order of persons expressly for the purpose of maintaining, and enforcing, and executing the laws. For this office they are qualified, by a long and most laborious education; and are chosen from amongst their competitors on account of their superior proficiency: and, so far from having their time occupied with political engagements, they are absolutely prohibited from entering upon the great political arena of the nation, in order that they may be kept free from any undue bias, and be enabled to devote all their time and all their talents to the prosecution of their one object of dispensing justice through the land. And these persons take a circuit, not through one district only, (like Samuel, who went not beyond the country belonging to the tribe of Benjamin,) but through the whole kingdom; and *that*, not once only, but twice in the year, and in some part even thrice: and in respect of impartiality and integrity, they were not exceeded even by Samuel himself. Under the whole heavens there never was a country where the laws were more equitably, more impartially dispensed. Even religion itself, which, as an object of aversion, is more likely to warp the judgment than any thing else, is sure to find support according to the laws; and, if it is on any occasion oppressed, it is only in conformity with laws that have been unadvisedly enacted, and not in opposition to laws that have been made for its support.

And who amongst us has not reason to bless God for such a constitution as this? Who is there that can injure the very meanest amongst us, without being amenable to the laws, and paying the penalty due to his transgression? The peace and security which we of this happy land enjoy, under the dominion of the laws, are not exceeded by any people under heaven, and are equalled by very few. And this benefit depends not on the life of any individual: (the Israelites found a far different state of things under the government of Saul:) it is the constitution of the land: it is transmitted and perpetuated under every reign: and I trust it will continue the happy portion of this country to the latest generations!]

2. In our religious privileges—

[We have not *one* altar raised, in one favoured place; but many, throughout the whole land; so that, for the most part, they are accessible to all: and where the increase of population has required more, they have been erected, with great liberality, at the public expense. Nor is our worship so unedifying or expensive as that at Ramah. No, truly; we have a Liturgy provided for us; a Liturgy, in which all that was shadowed forth under the Jewish ceremonies is plainly

declared. The imposition of hands on a dying victim, the sprinkling of his blood upon the mercy-seat and on the offerer, and the consuming of his flesh upon the altar, were but faint emblems of what we are taught in express terms. We go as sinners unto God: we bring before him that great Sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ: we implore mercy in the name of that adorable Saviour; and declare our affiance in his all-atoning blood, which we sprinkle on our consciences for the remission of our sins. The king upon the throne, and the meanest subject in the land, here meet upon a footing of equality; all having equal access to God, and equal encouragement to expect mercy at his hands. Say, ye who are here assembled, whether ye do not feel your elevation in these respects, and congratulate yourselves that the golden sceptre of mercy is held forth equally to all; and that, instead of having occasion to envy the great and mighty of the earth, you have reason rather to rejoice that “there is no respect of persons with God,” or that, if there be, it is in your favour; since God has “chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and heirs of his kingdom^c.” Truly the preaching of the Gospel, unrestrained as it is to time, or place, or party, calls for the devoutest gratitude from every person in the land.]

LEARN ye then, Brethren,

1. How to appreciate the blessings ye enjoy—

[We have seen how happy Israel was under the government of Samuel; and what still richer privileges we of this nation enjoy. But we are surprisingly slow to acknowledge the blessings which are thus richly bestowed upon us. Indeed, the commonness of these mercies is the very thing which hides them from our view. Could we but see what has been done by the Court of Inquisition in Popish countries, and what is still done wherever that tribunal exists; could we see our own friends and relatives seized for some supposed crime, we know not what; and carried, we know not whither; and tried, by we know not whom; and put to death by torments more cruel and lingering than we can conceive; verily we should bless our God for our courts of law, for our trials by jury, for the publicity of all judicial acts, and for the high unimpeachable integrity of our judges. And if we could conceive the cruelties exercised on thousands on account of articles of faith, we should indeed adore our God for the liberty we enjoy, of worshipping God in conformity with our own judgment, and of serving him according to the dictates of our own conscience. Religion, with us, is a part of the national law; and is upheld as sacred, against the efforts of all who would subvert it.

^c Jam. ii. 5.

Verily, I must say, if we praise not God for these benefits, "the very stones may well cry out against us."]

2. How to improve the influence we possess—

[Samuel improved his influence for the honour of God, and for the benefit of man. And thus must we also act, according to our ability. True, we are not invested with such authority as his: yet have all of us, in our respective spheres, some opportunity of doing good. We may, both by our example and advice, promote the dominion of law and equity, by doing unto others as we, in a change of circumstances, would think it right that they should do unto us: yes, and on many occasions we may strengthen the hands of those who administer the laws, by giving them the aid of our testimony, and upholding them in the execution of their high office. In so doing, we may be public benefactors to the state. Yet we must not let our zeal be exercised only on things relating to the outward benefit of man: we must have a zeal for God also, and must endeavour to uphold his worship in the land: yes, and in *this* we must be particularly active in *the place where we live*. There are many who will take extensive circuits about some *temporal* matter, who yet are found very remiss *at home* in matters *relating to their God*. But in us should be combined a zeal, both public and personal, both civil and religious. Look well then, I pray you, Brethren, to this duty. Let there be in you a holy consistency: and let it be seen, that, if you are benevolent abroad, you are religious at home: and that the more closely your conduct is inspected, the brighter will it be found, and the more will your character be exalted in the estimation both of God and man.]

CCXCII.

CONVERSION A GROUND OF JOY.

1 Sam. x. 12. *Therefore it became a proverb, Is Saul also among the prophets?*

PROVERBS are short and weighty sentences, comprising in few words some great and important truth. Of this kind was that which David addressed to Saul: "Mine hand shall not be upon thee: as saith the proverb of the ancients, Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked^a." Of this kind were all

^a 1 Sam. xxiv. 12, 13.

the Proverbs of Solomon. But sometimes they are brief sayings referring to some particular event, which they serve at once both to commemorate and improve. The most remarkable of any in the Bible, is that which was used to commemorate God's interposition in behalf of Isaac, to preserve him from being offered up in sacrifice by his father's hand, and at the same time to shew what interpositions all God's faithful and obedient people may expect in the very moment of their greatest necessity: "In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen;" or, as it should rather be translated, "In the mount (the mount of difficulty) the Lord shall be seen^b." The proverb in our text is of a less serious kind: yet it is very instructive, as shewing, that God will impart his blessings to whomsoever he will, and not unfrequently to those who we should, humanly speaking, say, were least likely to receive them.

Upon the people of Israel desiring to have a king over them, God appointed Saul to be their king. But, when Samuel announced to Saul the purpose of God respecting him, Saul could not believe it. Samuel, however, gave him signs, whereby he should infallibly know the truth of what had been declared. The first was, that he should find two men by Eze-kiel's sepulchre, who should announce to him, that his father had found the asses, for the loss of which he had been grieved; and that he was now sorrowing for him, whom he had sent to search for them. The next was, that in the Plain of Tabor he should meet three men going up to Bethel with three kids, and three loaves of bread, and a bottle of wine, to offer to the Lord; and that two of the loaves they should give to him. The third was, that, on his arriving at the hill of God, where was (or rather *had been*) a garrison of the Philistines, a company of prophets should come down with different instruments of music, and should prophesy; and that "the Spirit of the Lord should come down on *him*, and *he* should prophesy with them, and be turned into another

^b Gen. xxii. 14.

man^c." All these predictions came to pass accordingly; and all the people, when they saw Saul prophesying, as skilfully as any of the other prophets, were filled with wonder, that he, who had never been instructed, should be able to perform his part in so extraordinary a way. They could scarcely believe their own senses. And so remarkable was it in their eyes, that it served them as a proverb, whereby to express to all future generations any great and unlooked-for improvement in the mind of man: "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

Now this proverb we may consider as containing,
I. A subject for grateful admiration—

What surprise this change in Saul occasioned amongst all who beheld it, we are informed in the verse before our text: "It came to pass, when all that knew him beforetime saw, that, behold, he prophesied among the prophets, then the people said one to another, What is this that is come unto the son of Kish? Is Saul among the prophets?" A similar surprise, too, is often created by the change wrought in persons at this day by the grace of God; being wrought under circumstances which, to the eye of sense, appear most unfavourable. Many are converted to God, when no such change could have been hoped for,

1. From their age—

[Some are awakened after they have attained the middle period of life, when it might have been supposed, that their sentiments and habits were so firmly fixed as not to admit of any material alteration. Respecting such, we may suppose their friends to say, 'I am surprised at him, a man of sense and judgment! a man of correct habits and sound principles! How can it be, that *he* should suffer himself to be warped by the statements of any foolish enthusiast? I can scarcely believe it: Is *HE* become one of these deluded people?'— — — Amongst the godly, too, the same surprise may prompt them to ask, 'And is *he* become one of us?']

Others are turned to God at a very early age, before they could well be expected to exercise any just discretion on matters

^c ver. 2—6.

of such moment. Of them we may suppose the observation to be, What! at his early age has he begun to think? At a time of life when we might expect nothing but thoughtless levity to occupy his mind, has HE begun to set God before him, and to devote himself to his Saviour with his whole heart? Who could have conceived that *he* should so appreciate the value of his soul, and feel so deeply the importance of eternity? It seems as if another Samuel or Timothy were born into the world, if not a very John, who was sanctified from the womb — — —]

2. From their occupations—

[At the very first establishment of Christianity, soldiers flocked to ask counsel of John the Baptist, and Roman centurions believed in Christ^d. Amongst the very Apostles of our Lord, too, was Matthew, a publican, called by Christ, when sitting at the receipt of custom. So now, from amidst camps, where, for the most part, a dissoluteness of manners, rather than any thing of serious piety, may be supposed to dwell, does the work of conversion go forward; and amidst the busiest scenes of worldly merchandize is the still small voice of redeeming love attended to, and made effectual for the salvation of men. And what may we suppose their companions in arms or arts to say? ‘I am amazed at *him*! *He*, so bold and intrepid as to brave death in its most terrific forms, is he brought down to such a state of feminine weakness, as to be weeping for his sins, and reading his Bible, and praying to God, and performing, I know not how many self-denying services, which he calls his duty? And this other person, too, who was advancing so rapidly towards opulence, is he all on a sudden sitting loose to wealth, and attending to the concerns of his soul?’

And whilst their former friends express their surprise thus, in a way of regret, we may well imagine that those to whom they have joined themselves are not a whit less ready to express the same, in a way of grateful admiration — — —]

3. From their habits—

[One has lived a self-sufficient sceptic, in haughty unbelief, despising, as weak and credulous, all who yield to the authority of God’s blessed word — — — Another has, with the same proud spirit, valued himself on his attachment to that word, and his conformity to all its dictates; and, from a conceit of his own superior piety, has despised others, and disdained to humble himself, even in the presence of Almighty God — — — In another has been found nothing but thoughtless gaiety, and a round of habitual dissipation. He has done nothing that violates

^d Matt. viii. 5, 10. Acts x. 1, 47, 48.

decorum; he has conformed to the standard which the society in which he lives has established; and he has seen no great end of life, but to consult his own happiness, and to contribute his quota to the happiness of those around him — — — Another has felt himself more at liberty, and has launched forth into a more licentious course, gratifying his every inclination, without any other restraint than that which worldly prudence has imposed — — —

Now, diverse as these habits are, they all present peculiar obstacles to the conversion of the soul. Pride of intellect, self-righteous conceit, love of the world, addictedness to sensual pleasure, all obstruct our way to heaven; and it is a miracle of mercy whenever any of them are overcome. Habit, of whatever kind it be, becomes a second nature; and nothing but Omnipotence can effectually counteract it. When, therefore, this is overcome, and an opposite habit is established in its stead, it gives a just occasion for every observer to remark, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"]

4. From their connexions—

[It not unfrequently happens, that one in a family, surrounded by friends who are altogether adverse to religion, is brought to the knowledge of Christ, whilst all the others are left in darkness; and is enabled to confess Christ, whilst all the others, in a way of solicitation or of menace, put forth their utmost efforts to prevent it. Amidst hatred, contempt, persecution, perhaps the weakest member of the family is enabled to maintain his ground, and to be faithful to his conscience and his God. In the circle in which he moved, it seemed almost impossible that divine grace should reach him: the darkness seemed almost impervious to light, or, at all events, the chains that bound him, incapable of being loosed. But as God, in the case of Peter, caused light to shine into the prison, and the fetters to be loosed, and the prisoner to come forth, so that the very people of God themselves, when they heard his voice, could not credit it; so have we seen, in divers places, the power of God put forth, and "from Cæsar's household, yea, and from the very stones, as it were, children raised up to Abraham." These events, whensoever they occur, cannot but excite, in all the family of Christ, a grateful admiration, and a devout thanksgiving to Almighty God.]

But we may see in this proverb also,

II. A matter for prudential inquiry—

When we behold how delusive these appearances were in the instance of Saul; and that afterwards, when he was in the very act of seeking to destroy

David, he prophesied again, and excited in the beholders the same wonder as before^e; we cannot but feel extremely jealous of such conversions; and, together with our grateful admiration, blend also a measure of prudential inquiry, saying, “*Is Saul among the prophets?*”

This is a matter which ought not to be too hastily assumed—

[It is a fact, that many “have a name to live, whilst they are really dead^f,” and “say they are Jews, whilst they are not, but do lie^g.” “Many will say unto Christ, Lord, Lord! when they will not do his will^h,” and “name the name of Christ, when they will not depart from iniquityⁱ.” In the days of old, many would call themselves the children of Abraham, when they would not do the works of Abraham^k: so now at this day, many will “profess that they know God, whilst they” palpably and habitually “in works deny him^l.” So far do many carry their self-deception, that they both live and die in the full confidence of their acceptance with God, when yet they have never truly known him; and they will even go to the bar of judgment, as it were, with their arrogant claims in their mouths, “Lord, have we not *prophesied* in thy name, and in thy name cast out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works?” But to their utter consternation will the Judge address them, “Depart from me: I never knew you, ye workers of iniquity^m.”]

How, then, shall the point be determined?

[I answer, if you would know whether you are *indeed* among the prophets, inquire diligently, whether you have *the mind* of the prophets; and whether you have *the spirit* of the prophets. If we do not accord with the Prophets and Apostles in their views of Christ, the matter is clear; we can have no part with them. Moses and all the prophets testified of Him, as the only Saviour of the world: and, if we do not regard him in this light, renouncing all our own righteousness, and looking for acceptance through Him alone, we stand at once self-convicted, and self-condemned.

But we must go further, and examine whether we be renewed, not merely in sentiment, but also “in the spirit of our mind.” We must not merely have a new creed, but really be made new creatures, having all our dispositions and desires conformed to those of Christ himself; being “holy as he is

^e 1 Sam. xix. 15, 20—24.

^f Rev. iii. 1.

^g Rev. iii. 9.

^h Matt. vii. 21.

ⁱ 2 Tim. ii. 19.

^k John viii. 39.

^l Tit. i. 16.

^m Matt. vii. 22, 23.

holy," and "pure as he is pureⁿ." If we would not deceive our own souls, we should take the faith of Abraham, the meekness of Moses, the devotion of David, the firmness of Elijah, the integrity of Daniel, and all the characteristic virtues of the several prophets, as tests whereby to try our own: and though we are far from combining in ourselves all their respective excellencies, yet there must be no grace which we allowedly neglect, or which we do not aspire after with our whole hearts. We must be Christians "not in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth:" nor can we hope ever to be approved of our God, if we be not "Israelites indeed, in whom there is no guile."]

By way of APPLICATION,

1. Let me speak to some a word of encouragement—

[Many are ready to say, "I can never hope to be numbered with the children of God." But, if God chose Saul to an earthly kingdom, may he not choose us to one in a better world? If he fitted him for the discharge of earthly duties, may he not fit us for those which are heavenly? The exercise of sovereignty is the same in either case: and as there certainly was nothing in Saul to merit the distinction conferred on him, so may we hope that God's sovereign choice may be fixed on us, though we are conscious that there is nothing in us to conciliate his regards. Perhaps, too, this may be done at a time that we least expect so great a blessing. Saul was occupied in seeking his father's asses, when Samuel made known to him God's purpose respecting him, and anointed him to the regal office. And who can tell? You may have come hither, at the present moment, with as little expectation of receiving any distinguished benefit as he: and yet this may be the hour when God will call you to his kingdom and glory, and give you "an unction from the Holy One^o" to prepare you for it. Look up to God; and pray that he would now, by his almighty power, make you, not only "another man," but "a new creature in Christ Jesus:" so may you hope that it shall be done unto you; and that, as the Church of old, on seeing the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, "were amazed, and said, Is not this he that destroyed them who called on this name in Jerusalem?^p" so they may admire the grace of God in you, and, with joyful thanksgivings, may "glorify God in you^q."]

2. Let me take up, over others, an affectionate lamentation—

ⁿ 1 John iii. 3.

^p Acts ix. 20, 21.

^o 1 John ii. 20.

^q Gal. i. 23, 24.

[Respecting too many of you, alas! it must rather be asked, 'What! Is he not yet among the prophets?' Has he heard the word so long and so faithfully preached in vain? — — — Has the Spirit of God so often striven with him in vain? — — — Has he made so many good resolves in vain? — — — Alas! how aggravated is his guilt! and how awful will be his condemnation! Yes, Brethren, you must, many of you at least, be sensible, that no great and visible and lasting change has taken place in you, nothing that has excited the admiration of others, nothing that has called forth thanksgiving in yourselves. If you compare yourselves with the Prophets and Apostles of old, you can find in yourselves no real resemblance to them, either in zeal for God or in devotedness to His service. I would not, Brethren, that you should continue in this unhappy state. You may perhaps, when you see the prophets with "their tabret and their pipe," be ready to account it all enthusiasm: and I readily acknowledge, that *now* the melody must be rather in the heart, than in any external and audible expressions. But there must be the praises of God both in your heart and in your mouth; and your whole life also must testify that "God is with you of a truth." Be in earnest, then, and seek without delay converting grace: and, "whilst ye have the light, walk in the light, that ye may become the children of the light^r."]

^r John xii. 35, 36.

CCXCIII.

THE ISRAELITES' REJECTION OF SAMUEL REPROVED.

1 Sam. xii. 16—23. *Now therefore stand and see this great thing, which the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not wheat harvest to-day? I will call unto the Lord, and he shall send thunder and rain; that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which ye have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king. So Samuel called unto the Lord; and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day: and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king. And Samuel said unto the people, Fear not: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; and turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they are vain. For the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name's sake: because it*

hath pleased the Lord to make you his people. Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you.

THERE is scarcely any more curious part of sacred history than that which relates to the appointment of Saul to the throne of Israel. He was a man of noble stature, but of a low family. His father's asses had strayed, and he went with a servant three days in search of them. His provisions were exhausted; and he thought of returning home, lest his father should begin to be anxious about him. His servant understanding that they were not far from the abode of Samuel, whom they supposed to be a kind of magician, and capable of informing them where the asses were, proposed that they should call upon him, and seek that information at his hands: but having no money left to pay this magician for his trouble, they were discouraged; having no idea that he would give his advice without a fee. The servant however said he had the fourth part of a shekel (about seven-pence of our money) left, and that they would offer him that. Accordingly they went; and were informed that the asses were found. But Saul had further information, that quite astonished him. The people of Israel had requested Samuel to appoint a king over them; and God, on being applied to by Samuel, directed him to comply with their request; and told him moreover, that this very Saul was the person whom he should appoint. Accordingly he told Saul what God had ordained; and gave him several signs whereby he should know infallibly that the matter was of God: and then convoked the people, and drew lots before the Lord; and Saul was the person on whom the lot fell. Saul, through modesty, hid himself; but God disclosed to Samuel the place where he was hid: and Samuel sent for him, and committed to him the charge of the kingdom, for which God then fitted him by some special gifts.

Were we to judge only from that part of the history to which we have already alluded, we should suppose

that this change in the constitution of Israel was pleasing to God: but Samuel, by divine command, declared the contrary, and condemned the people with great severity. This is related in the words of our text; from whence we shall be led to notice,

I. The sin committed—

The Israelites desired to change the form of their government, and to have a king appointed over them—

[For this desire they had many specious reasons. Samuel was now old, and incapable of supporting the fatigues of government: he had therefore delegated a large portion of his authority to his sons, who, alas! were far from walking in his steps, or executing aright the trust reposed in them. This was assigned as one reason for their request^a. But though this would have justified a request for Samuel's interposition to reprove, or even to depose, them, it was by no means a sufficient reason for them to seek an extinction of that form of government which God himself had appointed, and a substitution of another in its stead.

They were now also alarmed with the menaces of Nahash, king of the Ammonites, who was preparing to invade them^b: and they wished to have the power of their government vested in the hands of one who should be able to protect them. But they needed not an arm of flesh, whilst they had Jehovah for their king: and if Jehovah had not delivered them according to their desire, it was owing to themselves, who by their sins had forfeited his protection. They therefore should have made this an occasion of humiliation and of turning unto God, and not an occasion of desiring another king in the place of God.

Besides, they wished to be in this respect like the nations around them^c, forgetting that a *Theocracy* was their highest honour, and most distinguished privilege.]

This desire of theirs was exceeding sinful—

[It was, in the first place, an act of great folly; for they enjoyed all the benefits of kingly government, without any of its expenses or of the evils generally arising out of it^d — — — In the next place, it was a mark of base ingratitude towards Samuel, who had spent his whole life in their service: and in this view Samuel could not but feel it, and complain of it. Yet so heavenly was his mind, that instead of resenting it, he committed it to God in prayer; and never complained of it till

^a 1 Sam. viii. 1—5.

^b 1 Sam. xii. 12.

^c 1 Sam. viii. 19, 20.

^d 1 Sam. viii. 9—18.

after the appointment of a king had been ratified and confirmed. Then indeed he appealed to them, whether he had not conducted himself towards them with the most unblemished integrity^e — — — But past services were of little account with persons so infatuated and self-willed as that people were at this time. But further, it was also a direct and open rejection of God himself. This was the construction which God himself put upon it^f. And how little HE deserved this treatment at their hands, Samuel shewed them, by recounting to them the mercies which he had vouchsafed unto their nation, from its first existence even to that day^g.

But they were deaf to every statement that he could make, and insensible to every feeling that should have actuated their minds: for who can convince those who are determined not to be convinced? “Nay; but we *will*^h,” is but a poor answer from those who are taught what *God* willeth. It is indeed the answer of sinners in general: but all who make such a reply, will hear of it again from God himself.]

What we are to think of their conduct, will further appear from,

II. The reproof administered—

Such wickedness as this could not pass unproved. Samuel therefore “solemnly protested against them,” as God had commandedⁱ; and then proceeded to deal with them in that way which he conceived to be most conducive to their amendment:

1. He desired a judgment from God, with a view to their humiliation—

[There was not at that time any appearance of a storm, nor was the wheat harvest a season when storms often occurred. But he requested of God to manifest his displeasure by a sudden tempest: and immediately the thunders rolled, the rain descended in torrents, and the indignation of the Lord was clearly shewn; insomuch that “the people greatly feared both the Lord and Samuel.” Thus was the desired effect produced: the people saw that they had sinned; and entreated the intercession of Samuel, that they might not be punished according to their deserts. How different is the voice of God from that of man! *that* will convince the most obstinate, and soften the most obdurate: and, sooner or later, they who will not yield

^e 1 Sam. xii. 2—5.

^f 1 Sam. viii. 7.

^g 1 Sam. x. 17—19. and xii. 7—11.

^h 1 Sam. viii. 19. and xii. 12.

ⁱ 1 Sam. viii. 9.

to the remonstrances of God's servants, shall be spoken to in a way which they can neither gainsay nor resist.]

2. He proclaimed mercy from God with a view to their encouragement—

[There was nothing vindictive in the conduct of Samuel: he lamented that the people should act so wickedly, and that God should be so dishonoured; but he willingly sacrificed his own interests, and cheerfully resigned the power which had been committed to him. He saw how agitated the people were; and gladly embraced the opportunity of pouring balm into their wounds. He bade them “not fear;” for though they had sinned greatly, God would not utterly cast them off; and though there was nothing in *them* to induce him to shew mercy, he would be merciful to them “for *his great name's sake*.” It was not for any merit of theirs that God had ever made them his people, but purely of his own sovereign will and pleasure: and, to shew them “the immutability of his counsel,” he would still continue his favours to them, notwithstanding this great transgression. They must however turn unto *him*, and cleave unto *him*, and no longer look unto the creature for deliverance; for on no other terms would he acknowledge them as his people, or vouchsafe unto them the blessings which he had reserved for them. As far as depended on himself, Samuel assured them, that *he* would harbour no resentment for the indignity offered him, but would continue to pray for them to his dying hour. Thus admirably did he temper severity with kindness, and soften fidelity with love.]

By way of IMPROVEMENT, let us BEWARE lest there be amongst us also any who reject God—

[If the rejection of *Samuel* was a rejection of *God*, what must a rejection of *CHRIST* be? and yet, how many are there who say of *HIM*, “We will not have this man to reign over us^k!” Yes, though expostulated with, and warned with all fidelity, how many persist in this awful determination! They say in effect to their minister, “As for the word that thou hast spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee^l.” To disregard the voice of his faithful ministers may appear a small thing; but it is not really so; for Jesus identifies himself with his servants; “He that receiveth you, receiveth me; and he that receiveth me, receiveth him that sent me^m.” Beware then, Brethren, how you presume to set aside the authority of Christ, or to place a rival upon his throne. God may give you your own way; but it will be a curse to you, and not a blessing. Woe be unto you indeed,

^k Luke xix. 14.

^l Jer. xliv 16.

^m Matt. x. 40.

if you provoke God to “choose your delusionsⁿ.” He says of Israel, “I gave them a king *in mine anger*, and took him away in my wrath^o ;” as you know he did, in a miserable and disgraceful manner^p. Beware lest such be the termination of your ways also, and lest you “be given up to believe a lie, as a prelude to your final condemnation^q.” The direction of God to you is clear; “O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in ME is thy help: I will be thy King^r.” Let this counsel be welcomed by you; and your submission to his government shall ere long be followed by a participation of his glory.]

ⁿ Isai. lxvi. 4. ^o Hos. xiii. 11. ^p 1 Sam. xxxi. 3—10.

^q 2 Thess. ii. 11, 12. ^r Hos. xiii. 9, 10.

CCXCIV.

DEVOTION TO GOD URGED FROM A SENSE OF GRATITUDE.

1 Sam. xii. 23, 24. *I will teach you the good and the right way: only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you.*

A ZEAL for the honour of God, and a concern for the welfare of men's souls, are the most striking features of a spiritual mind; and, when truly felt, will swallow up all selfish considerations, and take occasion, even from injuries received, to display their energy towards those who have injured us. This disposition was manifested in no small degree by the Prophet Samuel, who, having long been the teacher, the governor, and the deliverer of Israel, was deposed, though not by force, yet by the unanimous wishes of his nation, who desired to have a king after the manner of the surrounding nations. Instead of expressing any resentment against them for this indignity, he only inquired of them whether they could charge him with any mal-administration, and then assured them of a continued interest in his prayers, and exhorted them to serve the Lord with their whole hearts.

His words will naturally lead us to consider,

I. The duty here inculcated—

All, who believe the existence of God, acknowledge

that he is worthy to be feared and served : but when our duty to him is practically enforced, too many cry out against it as the offspring of superstition and the parent of fanaticism.

Let us mark then with precision what our duty is—

[To fear God, is, to regulate our conduct by the unerring standard of his word, avoiding carefully every thing which may displease him, and doing with diligence whatever is pleasing in his sight. But this must be done “*in truth* :” it is not a feigned obedience that will suffice : hypocritical services, however specious, must be odious to God : “He requireth truth in our inward parts :” and though “he will not be extreme to mark” our unavoidable infirmities, he will fearfully resent every instance of dissimulation : “He cannot be deceived, and will not be mocked :” to be accepted of him, we must be “Israelites indeed, and without guile.” Moreover, our services must be, not like the constrained obedience of a slave, but the willing expressions of filial regard ; they must be done “*with all our heart*.” If, like “Amaziah, we did that which was *materially* right in the sight of the Lord, yet not with a perfect heart,” it would be of no avail^a : we must, like Hezekiah, “do it with all our heart” if we would “prosper^b.” Nothing must be deemed too hard to do, or too great to suffer, that God may be glorified. David’s direction to Solomon to “serve the God of his father with a *perfect heart* and a *willing mind*,” completely expresses the nature of our duty as it is inculcated in the text^c.]

Let us next observe the importance of this duty—

[In the text it is said to be a *right*, and *good*, and *necessary* way ; and not only in comparison of other ways, but to the exclusion of all others. They indeed, who most faithfully enforce the practice of this duty, are often reproached as deceivers, that would impose upon weak minds, and lead astray the ignorant and unwary. The example of the world is urged in opposition to them as a better standard of right and wrong than the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless we must insist with Samuel that this way is “*right* ;” “the broad road” of sin and self-indulgence leads men to destruction ; and “the narrow path alone of holiness and self-denial leadeth unto life^d.” Nor is this way merely despised, as erroneous ; it is also reprobated, as pernicious ; and both they who teach it and they who follow it, are often deemed the very bane of society. While the drunkard and the whoremonger are respected, and

^a 2 Chron. xxv. 2.

^b 2 Chron. xxxi. 20, 21.

^c 1 Chron. xxviii. 9.

^d Matt. vii. 13, 14.

excused, "he that departeth from evil is considered as a prey^e," which all are at liberty to hunt and devour. But the testimony of Samuel, confirmed as it is by numberless other passages of Holy Writ, is sufficient to outweigh all that the blind votaries of sin and Satan can bring against religion. It is most assuredly, not only the right, but the "*good*" way; and though other ways may be more pleasing to flesh and blood, there is not any so productive of happiness, so perfective of our nature, or so conducive to the welfare of society.

Many, who feel convinced that fervent piety is both right and good, yet will not be persuaded that it is *necessary*. They acknowledge perhaps that ministers, and others who are detached from worldly engagements, should cultivate the fear of God: but a just attention to divine things seems to them incompatible with their own peculiar state and calling. Let none however imagine that any lawful calling is an impediment to religion: Adam even in Paradise had work assigned him by God himself, as being no less subservient to the welfare of his soul than to the health of his body^f. The truth is, that religion is "the one thing needful;" nor though, like Samuel or David, we had a kingdom to govern, could we plead any exemption on account of the multiplicity or importance of our engagements. The word of God to every living creature is, "Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man^g."]

That while we acknowledge our duty we may also be led to practise it, let us consider,

II. The argument with which it is enforced—

The Jews were singularly indebted to God for their deliverance from Egypt, their preservation in the wilderness, their investiture in the promised land, and the many wonderful interpositions of the Deity on their behalf in the time of their Judges. But waving any further mention of *them*, let us call to mind the mercies vouchsafed to *us*:

1. The temporal—

[Numberless are the blessings which every individual amongst us has received; as are those also, which are conferred upon the nation at large. But on the present occasion it will be proper to contemplate rather the privileges we enjoy in our corporate capacity^h — — — And should not these

^e Isai. lix. 15.

^f Gen. ii. 15.

^g Eccl. xii. 13.

^h If this were the subject of a *Commemoration* Sermon, the peculiar privileges that are enjoyed should here be stated: but if of a *Thanksgiving*, the special occasions for thankfulness should here be opened.

operate as inducements to fidelity and diligence in the service of our God? Does not every favour bestowed upon us address us, as it were, in the words of Samuel, "*Only* fear the Lord?" Does it not bind us also, according to the ability and opportunities afforded us, to teach others "the good and the right way?" Instead then of making our situation an occasion for carnality, or an excuse for lukewarmness, let us endeavour to "render to the Lord according to the benefits he has conferred upon us."]

2. The spiritual—

[As the most signal mercies imparted to the Jewish nation were typical of far richer benefits reserved for the Christian Church, we should but ill consult the scope of the text, and still less the advancement of our eternal interests, if we should omit to mention our obligations to God for spiritual blessings. "Consider" then that stupendous act of mercy, *the gift of God's dear Son*: consider that he was given up to death, even the accursed death of the cross, for us sinners, for the recovery of our souls from death and hell, and for the restoration of them to the divine favour; how unfathomable the mystery! how incomprehensible the love! *The terms too upon which God will accept sinners*; how easy, how simple, how suited to our lost and helpless nature! We have only to "believe in Christ, and we shall be saved¹." Can any thing be more encouraging; or lay us under greater obligations to obedience? Consider further, *the benefits we receive by believing*: we are instantly brought into the family of God; we enjoy sweet "fellowship with the Father and the Son;" we have the sting of death taken away; and we have an eternal inheritance in heaven: shall all this love have no constraining influence? shall it not cause us to present ourselves as living sacrifices to God, that we may both live to him who died for us, and glorify God with our bodies and our spirits which are his^k? Yes; such were the sentiments of an inspired Apostle; nor can any rational being controvert or doubt such self-evident deductions. Let us then apply them in confirmation of the text, and fix them on our minds as motives to serve God with all our hearts. Let us put away that worldliness and sensuality, which are the bane and curse of our souls. Let us discard formality, that blinding, that deluding sin. Let us also abhor hypocrisy, that basest of all sins. Let us serve our God, not with a few outward ceremonies, but with the inward devotion of our hearts¹. Let us not study how we may contract our regards to him into the smallest possible space; but how we may glorify

¹ Acts xvi. 31.

^k 2 Cor. v. 14. Rom. xii. 1. 1 Cor. vi. 20.

¹ 1 John iii. 18.

his name, and advance his interests. And while we thus cultivate the fear of him in our own hearts, let us, with Samuel, labour to the utmost, that he may be feared and served by all around us^m.]

^m Here, if it were judged proper, the connexion of our piety with the prosperity of the nation, as marked in the words following the text, might be urged as an additional, though inferior, motive to zeal and diligence.

CCXCV.

SAUL'S IMPATIENCE.

1 Sam. xiii. 11—13. *And Samuel said, What hast thou done? And Saul said, Because I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that thou camest not within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered themselves together at Michmash; therefore said I, The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the Lord: I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt-offering. And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly.*

IN a reply which Elihu made to Job, it is confidently asked, “Is it fit to say to a king, Thou art wicked; and to princes, Ye are ungodly^a?” To this I answer, that doubtless respect and deference are due to rank; but not to such an extent as to compromise fidelity to God, and fidelity to the souls of men. If a Herod take his brother's wife, a servant of God must tell him plainly, “It is not lawful for thee to have her.” And if a Saul violate openly, before all, an express command of God, a Samuel does well to interrogate him, “What hast thou done?” and to tell him with an authoritative tone, “Thou hast done foolishly.” Even a young minister, in cases of a more flagrant nature, must consider himself as God's ambassador, and must “rebuke with all authority^b.”

That we may understand exactly wherein Saul's conduct was exceptionable, I will shew,

I. How far it was good and commendable—

We by no means condemn it altogether; for, in part, we think it deserving of praise. He did well,

^a Job xxxiv. 18.

^b Tit. ii. 15.

1. In that he dared not to encounter his adversaries till he had implored help from God—

[What more becoming than this? Surely we may all learn from it. For, in ourselves, we are unable to do any good thing: and to undertake any thing in our own strength is the certain prelude to defeat^c. Nor is it in great and arduous matters alone that we should cry to God for help. Even “the thinking of a good thought” is beyond our power, without him^d. Under all circumstances, therefore, we must betake ourselves to God, that he may “help our infirmities^e,” and must “be strong only in the Lord, and in the power of his might^f.”]

2. In that he sought after God in the ordinances of God’s own appointment—

[“Burnt-offerings and peace-offerings” were appointed by God himself: the one to express our great need of mercy, through the sacrifice of Christ; and the other to express our gratitude for mercies received through him. Both of these were called for, and, in fact, are required of us also continually; because there can be no situation so favourable, but we need mercy; nor any situation so distressing, but we have abundant cause for thankfulness to Almighty God. The direction given us is, “In every thing by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* to make our requests known to God^g.” It is the due mixture of humiliation and gratitude that renders our addresses pleasing unto God. The very praises of all the heavenly hosts attest this to be the proper frame of a creature in the presence of his Creator^h: and therefore, whilst we applaud the union of both the offerings in the instance before us, let us take care to imitate it in all our addresses at the throne of grace.]

The reproof, however, that was given him, requires me to point out,

II. In what respects it was foolish and blameworthy—

At first sight, it seems as if he had usurped the priestly office: but I think that the enormity of such a crime could not fail to have been noticed in the reproof that was administered. I therefore forbear to allege that as any part of the accusation that is to be brought against him. His crime seems to have consisted principally in,

^c John xv. 5.

^d 2 Cor. iii. 5.

^e Rom. viii. 26.

^f Eph. vi. 10.

^g Phil. iv. 6.

^h Rev. v. 8, 9. and vii. 11.

1. His unbelieving precipitancy, in curtailing the appointed time—

[It is evident, from the acknowledgment of Saul himself, that he had been commanded to wait seven days for Samuel, in order to receive direction from him. It is evident also, that though he had waited to the seventh day, he had not tarried to the close of it, but had, through impatience and unbelief, transgressed the divine command. His very apology shews this. His army were deserting him through fear; and the Philistines were just at hand: and he could not wait another hour, lest he should be overwhelmed before he had made supplication to his God. But why should he offer sacrifice, when that duty devolved not on him, but on Samuel alone? He might have prayed to God as fervently as he pleased, and have urged every soldier in his army to do the same. This would have been no offence: it would rather have been pleasing and acceptable to God. But he yielded to unbelief, instead of waiting patiently upon God in an assured expectation of his promised aid. Now, the direction given by God to all his people is, "He that believeth, shall not make haste¹." The promise made to Abraham, relative to the deliverance of his posterity from Egypt, was not performed till the very last day of the four hundred and thirty years was arrived: and, in appearance, the accomplishment of it was hopeless. But had God forgotten it? Or did he suffer it to fail? No: "on that *self-same day*" that he had so long before designated, "he brought them out:" and we, in like manner, "however long the vision of our God may tarry, should wait for it, assured that it shall not tarry one instant beyond the appointed time^k," and that "not a jot or tittle of God's word shall ever fail."]

2. His unwarranted dependence on a merely ritual observance—

[He evidently thought that the performance of this ceremony was the only effectual way to secure for himself and his people a deliverance from their impending danger. But how absurd was this thought! Could it be supposed, that to disobey God's commands was the right way to conciliate his favour? or that the performance of a ceremony would supersede the necessity for his powerful intervention? Might not a moment's reflection have told him, that "to obey was better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams¹?" Yet thus it is with multitudes amongst ourselves, who, if they do but attend upon the house of God, and go to the table of the Lord, and

ⁱ Isai. xxviii. 16.

^k Hab. ii. 3.

^l 1 Sam. xv. 22.

perform a few other external duties, imagine that all shall be well with them. We forget that God looks at the heart; and utterly despises every offering we can present unto him, if it be not accompanied with real integrity, both of heart and life. His express declaration is, that “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, especially when he bringeth it with a wicked mind^m.” Let us then be aware of this. Let us fast and pray, and use all other means of obtaining help from God; but let us not expect the blessing from the means, but only from God in, and by, the means. Then shall we never be disappointed of our hope, but shall have daily increasing occasion to say, “Thanks be to God, who always causeth us to triumph in Christ!”]

LEARN, then, from hence,

1. Not to account any sin light—

[If any sin could be accounted light, certainly this of Saul might be so esteemed: for the enemy that pressed upon him was numerous as the sands upon the sea-shore, and well appointed in all respects; whilst his whole army consisted of only six hundred men, and not a single sword or spear amongst them all, except with himself and his son Jonathan. Under all these disadvantages, he had waited till the seventh day; and never, till he saw his men deserting him, and expected the enemy to come down instantly upon him, did he offer the sacrifice: and even then he did it with great reluctance. Yet for this sin he lost the kingdom to which God had called him. Now, we are apt to plead excuses just as he did; and to think that we are justified by a kind of necessity in our disobedience to God. But, whatsoever God has enjoined, *that* must we do, even though, for our obedience to him, we were to be cast the next hour into a fiery furnace, or a den of lions. I pray you, Brethren, settle this in your minds as an invariable principle, that nothing under heaven can justify us in violating a divine command.]

2. Wherein true wisdom consists—

[Whatever we may imagine, or whatever the world may say, disobedience to God will be found folly in the extreme; yes, and replete with danger, too, to our immortal souls. Wisdom and piety are one: and it is not without reason that, throughout all the writings of Solomon, they are identified. I would earnestly entreat you therefore, Brethren, not only to ask yourselves from day to day, “What have I done?” but to compare your doings with the commandments of God. Even your religious services I would wish to be brought to

^m Prov. xxi. 27.

the same test, that you may see how far they accord with the divine command, and how far they differ from it. God will not judge as we judge: no; he will judge righteous judgments, and will reject with abhorrence many of the services on which we place a very undue reliance. To be accepted of him, your faith must be simple, and your obedience unreserved. Abraham's conduct is the pattern which you must follow. "Go, Abraham, and offer up your son, your only son, Isaac." Here was no disputing against the divine command, nor any doubt in executing it, though he had three whole days to ruminate upon it. No: he knew, that if Isaac should be reduced to ashes upon the altar, God could raise him up again; and would do it, rather than suffer his promise to fail. To the execution of God's command he therefore set himself without delay. And do ye also act with like promptitude and zeal, and "be strong in faith, giving glory to God." This will prove wisdom in the issue; and will prove as conducive to your own happiness, as to the honour of that God whom you love and serve.]

CCXCVI.

JONATHAN'S VICTORY OVER THE PHILISTINES.

1 Sam. xiv. 6. *And Jonathan said to the young man that bare his armour, Come, and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised: it may be that the Lord will work for us: for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few.*

SO frequent are the wonders recorded in the Scripture, that we scarcely notice them; yet so great are they, that it is rather owing to our inattention, than to any real exercise of faith, that we do not reject them as altogether incredible and fabulous. This account of Jonathan is inferior to few, either in the strangeness of his feats, or the magnitude of their results. That we may have a clear view of the matter, we shall shew,

I. The state to which the Israelites were reduced—

The consequences of their choice began now plainly to appear—

[They had desired a king, and had persisted in their request, notwithstanding all the expostulations of Samuel; and God had complied with their request. But Saul had not possessed the throne of Israel two years, before his kingdom

was overcome by the Philistines, and brought into a state of the basest servitude. The Philistines would not so much as suffer the Israelites to have a smith of their own, lest he should make arms for them: so determined were they to keep the Israelites in the lowest state of subjection. Yet whilst they were in this state, Saul was imprudent enough to smite a garrison of the Philistines, and thereby to give his enemies a plea for utterly destroying the whole nation. Accordingly the Philistines called all their forces together, "thirty thousand chariots, six thousand horsemen, and foot soldiers as the sands on the sea-shore for number;" whilst Saul had but six hundred men, and not a single sword to be found amongst them all. To make their situation still more deplorable, Saul presumed to invade the priestly office, and to offer sacrifices to God without waiting the full time for Samuel that he had been expressly enjoined to wait; and thus he provoked God to take away from him the kingdom, and to transfer it to a person who should prove more worthy of it. Thus speedily was the nation reduced to ruin under that government which they had been so anxious to obtain.]

And such consequences may justly be apprehended by all who are bent upon their own wishes, in opposition to the mind and will of God—

[There is the same self-will in all of us: we do not like that God should choose for us: we think that we can contrive better for ourselves than he has done. If we feel any evil in existing circumstances, we do not so much consider how we may obtain his favour, as how we may ward off the effects of his displeasure. But inordinate desire of any kind will bring its own punishment along with it: and we shall all find at last, that our truest happiness consists, not in the accomplishment of our own will, or the gratification of our own desires, but in the favour and protection of Almighty God — — — Perhaps there is not a man to be found, who must not after mature reflection acknowledge, that, if God had suffered him in some particular instance to attain his own wishes, or execute his own desires, he would have rendered himself the most miserable of the human race — — —]

But, if we see God's hand in their punishment, much more do we in their deliverance. Let us therefore consider,

II. The means by which their deliverance was effected—

When nothing but utter destruction could be expected, God was pleased to interpose for them. He

stirred up the minds of Jonathan and his armour-bearer to go and attack a garrison, that, humanly speaking, was invincible even by a considerable force; and that too even in open day. They climbed up the rock in the very sight of their enemies, slew about twenty of them on the spot, spread terror through the whole camp of the Philistines, gave an opportunity for Saul and his adherents to pursue the fugitives, and would have utterly destroyed the whole Philistine army, if the rashness of Saul had not deprived his men of that refreshment which their exhausted strength required.

Wonderful was this victory, and most instructive: in contemplating it we cannot but SEE,

1. That God can work by the weakest means—

[Nothing can be conceived more inadequate to the occasion than the means that were here used — — — But God delights to magnify his own strength in his people's weakness, and to interpose for their deliverance in their greatest straits. It is for this very purpose that he often waits, till we are reduced to the lowest extremity^a. It was for that end that he reduced the hosts of Gideon from two and thirty thousand to three hundred; that the glory of their victory might be all his own^b. Whatever straits then or difficulties we may be in, we should consider that God is all-sufficient; and that "the things which are impossible to man, are possible with him."]

2. That a hope of his aid should encourage our exertions—

[Two things encouraged Jonathan; the one, "There is no restraint to the Lord to save, whether by many or by few;" and the other, "It may be that the Lord will work for us." And what greater encouragement can we want? for, "if God be for us, who can be against us?" When therefore we are tempted, from a view of our own weakness, to say, "There is no hope," we should call to mind "the great and precious promises" which God has given to us in his word, and the wonderful deliverances he has vouchsafed to his people in every age. In dependence upon him we should go forth, fearing nothing^c. Being "strong in the Lord and in the power of his might," we should gird on our armour, or even go forth with a sling and a stone against every enemy, not doubting but that, like Goliath of old, he shall ere long fall before us.]

^a Deut. xxxii. 36. ^b Judg. vii. 2—8. ^c Ps. xxvii. 1—3.

3. That faith in him will ensure to us the victory—

["Who ever trusted in him and was confounded?" See what wonders have been wrought by faith in former ages^d; and shall it have less efficacy now? Will it not still, as formerly, bring Omnipotence to our aid? Only have "faith as a grain of mustard-seed," and all mountains shall melt before you. Whilst faith is in exercise, we need not be afraid of viewing the obstacles that are in our way. Be it so, the enemy is entrenched on an almost inaccessible rock, and we cannot even get to him but in such a way as must expose us to instant death: be it so, that we have no one on our side, except perhaps a single companion as helpless as ourselves: be it so, that our enemy is not only prepared for our reception, but laughing to scorn our feeble attempts against him: it matters nothing; the victory is ours, if we go forth in faith; and not only "shall the devil flee from us, if we resist him thus in faith," but all his hosts also shall be put to flight, and "Satan himself shall be bruised under our feet shortly^e."

Let those then who are ready to give way to desponding fears remember on what a "Mighty One their help is laid^f," and let them "be strong in faith, giving glory to God^g."]

^d Heb. xi. 32—35.^e Rom. xvi. 20.^f Ps. lxxxix. 19.^g Rom. iv. 20.

CCXCVII.

MOURNING FOR THE SINS OF OTHERS.

1 Sam. xv. 11. *And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the Lord all night.*

NEVER can we be weary of contemplating the scripture history; so diversified are its incidents, and so instructive the examples it sets before us. The whole life of Samuel, from his first dedication to God by his mother to the very hour of his death, was one uniform course of piety. That particular part of it which I propose at present to consider, is his conduct in reference to Saul, when God declared his purpose to rend the kingdom from him, and to transfer it to another who should shew himself more worthy of it: we are told, "it grieved Samuel: and he cried unto the Lord all night."

In discoursing on these words, we shall notice,

I. The pious grief of Samuel—

Respecting this we shall distinctly consider,

1. The grounds of it—

[Saul had disobeyed the commandment of the Lord, in sparing Agag the king of the Amalekites, together with all the best of the spoil, when he had been strictly enjoined to destroy every thing, “man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

This, at first sight, might appear a venial fault, inasmuch as he had leaned to the side of mercy, and had acted in conformity with the wishes of his people; and had even consulted, as he thought, the honour of God, to whom he intended to offer all the best of the cattle in sacrifice.

But he had received a specific commission, which it was his duty to execute. He was not left at liberty to act according to circumstances: his path was marked out, and should have been rigidly adhered to.

It does not appear that he stopped short of his purpose, because he thought that the command itself was too severe: for, in the first instance, he set himself to execute it fully: but, if he had felt some reluctance on account of its severity, he had no alternative left him: it was his duty simply to obey. When Abraham was called to come out from his country and from his kindred, he obeyed, though he knew not which way he was to direct his steps. And, when he was enjoined to offer up upon an altar his own son Isaac, he hesitated not to do it; notwithstanding he knew that on the life of Isaac, to whose lineal descendants all the promises were made, the coming even of the Messiah himself essentially depended. Had he judged it right to listen to carnal reasonings of any kind, or to put his own feelings in competition with his duty, he might have easily found enough to satisfy his own mind. But he knew what was the duty of a creature: and he obeyed it without reserve. And so should Saul have done. We will take for granted that all his excuses were true; (though we doubt much whether covetousness was not the true source of his conduct:) still they were of no real weight: and his listening to them was nothing less than an act of rebellion against God.

And was not this a sufficient ground for grief? Yes: and Samuel did well in that he was grieved with it.

Doubtless Samuel was also grieved on account of the judgment which Saul had brought on himself and on his family, by this act of disobedience. He pitied the man who had subjected himself so grievously to the divine displeasure: and pitied his children also, who were involved both in his guilt and punishment. When he himself, indeed, had been dispossessed

of the kingdom, we do not find that he was grieved either for himself or his children: but for Saul and *his* children he deeply grieved. In his own case, Samuel had nothing to deplore: whilst he fell a victim to the ingratitude of man, he had a testimony from the whole nation, and from God himself, that he had discharged his duty towards them with fidelity: but in the case of Saul, he saw the man who had been specially called by God to the kingdom, now dispossessed of it by that very God who had appointed him, and under his heavy and merited displeasure. In a word, the sin and the punishment of Saul formed in the mind of Samuel one ground of deep and undissembled grief.]

2. The expression of it—

[By God the sentence against Saul had been pronounced; and none but God could reverse it. But so often, and in such astonishing instances, had God condescended to the prayers of his servants, yea, to the prayers of Samuel himself, that this holy man did not despair of yet obtaining mercy for his unhappy prince. He, therefore, betook himself to prayer, and continued in it all the night, hoping that, like Israel of old, he should at last prevail. With what “strong crying and tears” may we suppose he urged his suit! And what an extraordinary measure of compassion must he have exercised, when he could continue in supplication for a whole night together! Such had been his feelings towards the people at large, after they had rejected *him*: “God forbid that I should sin against the Lord, in ceasing to pray for you^a.” And such is the proper expression of love, whether towards God or man: for God it honours as a merciful and gracious God; whilst it seeks to benefit man, by bringing down upon him the blessing of the Most High.]

But, in contemplating his example, we are chiefly called to notice,

II. The instruction to be derived from it—

In this record we may see what should be our conduct,

1. In reference to the sins of others—

[It is amazing with what indifference the universal prevalence of sin is beheld by the generality of mankind. Those evils which tend to the destruction of all social comfort are indeed reprobated by men of considerate minds: but it is in that view alone that they are reprobated. As offending God, they are scarcely thought of: men may live altogether as

^a 1 Sam. xii. 23.

“without God in the world,” and no one will lay it to heart, or shew the least concern about the dishonour which is done to God.

The eternal interests of men too, it is surprising how little they are thought of. Men are dying all around us, and no one inquires whether they are prepared to die: and, when they are launched into eternity, no one feels any anxiety about their state, or entertains any doubt about their happiness before God. It is taken for granted that all who die are happy. Whether they sought after God or not, all is supposed to be well with them: and to express a doubt respecting it would be deemed the essence of uncharitableness and presumption.

But widely different from this should be the state of our minds. We are not indeed called to sit in judgment upon men: but to feel compassion towards them, and to pray for them, is our bounden duty. David tells us that “horror seized hold upon him,” and “rivers of waters ran down his cheeks, because men kept not God’s Law.” The Prophet Jeremiah exclaimed, “O that mine head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” Thus was it also with Samuel, in relation to Saul; and thus should it be with us, in reference to all around us. To see them dishonouring God and ruining their own souls, ought to create in us the same emotions as were felt by the Apostle Paul, when he declared that he had “great heaviness and continual sorrow in his heart for his brethren’s sake.” Even though we have no hope of doing them good, yet should we, like our blessed Saviour, weep over them, saying, “O that thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things that belong unto thy peace!” Nor should we ever cease to pray for them, in hope that God may be gracious unto them, and make them distinguished monuments of his grace.]

2. In reference to our own sins—

[Here is reason for the very same complaint. Men can violate every command of God, and feel no fear, no compunction. As for such a sin as Saul’s, it would not even be deemed a sin. ‘True, they have not strictly adhered to the divine command; but the command itself was too strict; and they complied with the solicitations of their friends; and they meant no harm.’ Hence, in their prayers, *if they pray at all*, there is no fervour, no importunity, no continuance. A transient petition or two is quite as much as their necessities require.

But did Samuel feel such grief for another, and should not we for ourselves? Did he cry to God all night for another,

and should we scarcely offer a petition for ourselves? Should the deposing of another from an earthly kingdom appear a judgment to be deprecated, and shall we not deprecate the loss of heaven for ourselves? Verily, in neglecting to pray for ourselves, we not only sin against God, but grievously sin also against our own souls.]

Let me then ADDRESS myself,

1. To those who are in a state of careless indifference—

[Alas! What a large proportion of every assembly does this comprise! What then shall I say unto you? To Samuel, whose grief for Saul was inconsolable, God said, “How long wilt thou mourn for Saul^b?” But to you I must say, How long will ye refuse to mourn for yourselves? Has not your impenitence continued long enough? Many of you have sinned against God, not in one act only, but in the whole course of your lives; and *that*, too, not in a way of *partial obedience* only, like Saul, but in direct and wilful disobedience. Will not ye, then, weep and pray? Remember, I entreat you, that if you will not humble yourselves before God, you must be humbled ere long; and if you will not weep now, you must ere long “weep, and wail, and gnash your teeth for ever” in that place where redemption can never come, nor one ray of hope can ever enter. I beseech you, Brethren, reflect on this; and now, whilst the sentence that is gone forth against you may be reversed, cease not to cry unto your God for mercy day and night.]

2. To those who are desirous of obtaining mercy from God—

[Great as was Samuel's interest with God, he could not prevail for Saul. But you have an Advocate, whose intercessions for you must of necessity prevail, if only you put your cause into his hands. This “Advocate is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is also the propitiation for your sins.” To him St. John directs you: and, if you go to him, it is impossible that you should ever perish: for he has expressly said, “Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.” To have a praying friend or minister is a great comfort to one who feels his need of mercy: but to have One who “ever liveth on purpose to make intercession for us,” and “whom the Father heareth always,” *this* is a comfort indeed. Commit then your cause, Brethren, into the Saviour's hands; and you may rest assured, that, whatever judgments you may have merited at God's hands, “you shall never perish, but shall have eternal life.”]

^b 1 Sam. xvi. 1.

CCXCVIII.

SAUL'S SELF-DECEIT.

1 Sam. xv. 13—16. *And Samuel came to Saul: and Saul said unto him, Blessed be thou of the Lord: I have performed the commandment of the Lord. And Samuel said, What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? And Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed. Then Samuel said unto Saul, Stay, and I will tell thee what the Lord hath said to me this night.*

IF the Holy Scriptures exhibit to us the most perfect patterns of righteousness, they also bring to our view men devoid of righteousness, and living characters of wickedness under all its diversified forms and operations. In truth, if we read them only as records of past events, without an application of them to our own business and bosoms, we may be amused and instructed by them, but we shall not be greatly edified. But if we view them as mirrors, in which our own countenance, and the countenances of those around us, are reflected, then, indeed, do we reap from them the benefit which they were intended to convey. Let us, then, take this view of the history before us, and see in it the state of the ungodly world at this time. Let us see in it,

I. Their presumptuous confidence—

Saul had been commanded to destroy the whole nation of Amalek, and every thing belonging to them: but he spared the best of their cattle; and yet boasted to Samuel, that he had “performed the commandment of the Lord.” In this we see the conduct of multitudes around us.

We all have received a commandment to wage war with our spiritual enemies, and to “destroy the whole body of sin^a”—

^a Rom. vi. 6.

[Not only is “our reigning lust” to be mortified^b, but every sinful disposition, though it be dear to us as “a right eye,” or apparently necessary to us as “a right hand^c.”]

But, whilst much remains unmortified, we take credit to ourselves as having fulfilled the will of God—

[The great majority of men, if not living in very flagrant iniquity, think, and wish others to think, that they have fulfilled the will of God, so far at least as not to leave them any material ground for shame and sorrow on account of their iniquities. See the self-complacent state of all around us. In the habit of their minds, they plainly say, “We have performed the commandment of the Lord,” and have ground for commendation on that account — — —]

But they stand reprovèd, one and all of them, by,
II. Their glaring inconsistency—

The very beasts which Saul had spared, convicted him of falsehood—

[It was impossible for him to resist the evidence which the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the oxen gave of his disobedience.]

And is there not equal evidence of the self-deceit of those around us?

[You say you have obeyed the voice of the Lord. Let me then ask, What means that *worldliness* which is so visible to all who behold you? Is it not clear and manifest, that the great mass of those who take credit to themselves on account of their obedience to God, are as much addicted to the world as any other persons whatever? They may be free from its grosser vices; but their cares, their pleasures, their company, their entire lives, shew indisputably whose they are, and to whom they belong. They are altogether “of the earth, earthly.”

And what means their *impenitence*, which is as manifest as the sun at noon-day? Who ever sees their tears, or hears their sighs and groans on account of indwelling sin? Who ever beholds them crying to God for mercy; and fleeing, like the man-slayer, with all possible earnestness, to the hope set before him in the Gospel? Does the heart-searching God behold any more of this in the secret chamber, than man beholds in the domestic circle, or in the public assembly?

I say, then, What means all this *indifference* to heavenly

^b Rom. vi. 12.

^c Matt. v. 29, 30.

things? It is as clear a demonstration of their disobedience to God, as were "the bleating of the sheep, and the lowing of the oxen," of Saul's hypocrisy.]

But in the reply of Saul to his reprover, we see,

III. Their vain excuses—

Saul cast the blame of his misconduct upon the people—

[Not only does he speak of them as the agents whom he could not control, but he declares that they were the authors of his disobedience, inasmuch as he was constrained to sanction their conduct through fear of their displeasure^d.]

This is the very rock on which all self-complacent Pharisees are wont to stumble—

[It is not owing to any want of inclination in themselves, that they do not serve God more perfectly, they will say, but to their situation and circumstances in life. It would be in vain for them to stem the torrent that carries all before it. Were they to follow the Lord fully, and to carry into effect the commands of God according to their full import, they should be altogether singular: and therefore they conform to the will of others, not from inclination, but necessity.]

But let me ask, Are we to obey *man* in opposition to God? Are we to "follow a multitude to do evil?" Even Saul himself acknowledged, that in such a compliance "he had greatly sinned^e:" and we may be sure that no such excuses will avail us at the judgment-seat of Christ.]

Let me, then, declare to you,

IV. Their impending fate—

Saul was rejected of his God—

[He might have urged in his behalf, that the command which had been given him, left him a discretion to exercise mercy: and, at all events, his desire had been to honour God with sacrifices which must otherwise have been withheld. But the commands of God leave nothing to our discretion. We are not at liberty to restrict any one of them; but are bound to execute them all in their full extent. And as Saul, in deviating from God's command, had, in fact, "rejected the word of the Lord, God, in righteous indignation, rejected him^f."]]

And what better fate awaits us who limit the commands of God?

^d ver. 21, 24.

^e ver. 21, 24.

^f ver. 23.

[It is in vain for us to dispute against the commands of God, as too strict, or too difficult. We are not called to dispute, but to obey. Nor is it a partial obedience that will suffice: nor are we at liberty to commute obedience for sacrifice. Nothing is left to us, but to obey: and, if we would please the Lord, we must “follow him fully:” our obedience must be entire and unreserved: and, if it be not unreserved, we are guilty of direct and positive “rebellion, which is declared by God himself to be, in his sight, even as idolatry:” for, whatever we may think to the contrary, there is little to choose between disobedience to the true God, and obedience to a false one^g.

I declare, then, to all of you, my Brethren, that, to whatever privileges you have been exalted by God himself, you will have reason to curse the day wherein you ever listened to man in opposition to God, or withheld from God the entire obedience of your souls. By whatever excuses you may palliate such conduct, I declare to you, before God, that it is rebellion against him, and that, as rebels, he will reject you in the day of judgment.]

As an IMPROVEMENT of this subject, there is one thing only which I would say; and that is, *Take the Holy Scriptures, in every thing, for your guide—*

[Call not any thing “A hard saying^h.” You may not be able to understand the reasons of God’s commands, or to appreciate his reasons aright, if they were stated to you. Doubtless, to study their real *import* is your duty: but when that is once ascertained, you have nothing to do but to obey them. You are not to sit in judgment upon them, or to lower their demands. If the whole world urge you to depart from them, you are in no wise to comply. For God you are to live: and, if need be, for God you are to die. It is on these terms alone that you can ever be acknowledged as Christ’s disciplesⁱ. If, then, “you have been called to God’s kingdom and glory,” see that you “walk worthy of your high calling.” “Be faithful unto death, and God will give you the crown of life.”]

^g ver. 23.

^h John vi. 60.

ⁱ Matt. x. 38, 39.

CCXCIX.

SAUL’S DISOBEDIENCE AND PUNISHMENT.

1 Sam. xv. 22, 23. *And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the*

sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king.

THE sins of God's enemies, and especially of those who obstruct his people in their way to Canaan, will certainly be punished: God indeed may bear long with them, even so long as to make them tauntingly exclaim, "Where is the promise of his coming?" but he will surely come at last, to their utter confusion and their eternal condemnation.

The Amalekites had very cruelly attacked the Israelites in the wilderness, and without any just occasion. God therefore gave them up to the sword of Joshua, and commanded that his people should in due time inflict upon them far more extensive judgments^a. The time was now come that their iniquities were full: and therefore God commanded Saul to execute upon them the threatening which had been denounced several hundred years before. This command Saul neglected to execute as he should have done; and thereby brought upon himself the heavy displeasure of his God. We behold in our text,

I. The sin reproved—

It might appear a small thing in Saul to spare Agag and the best of the cattle, when he had been enjoined to destroy all; and his vindication of himself to Samuel has an air of plausibility about it, which might almost reconcile us to this act as not very exceptionable: but Samuel, in the words before us, characterises the conduct of Saul,

1. As rebellion—

[The command which had been given was exceeding plain and strong. The solemnity with which it was given, "Hearken thou," &c.; the reason assigned for it, "What Amalek did to Israel in the way from Egypt;" the minuteness to which the order descended, "Go, smite Amalek, and destroy—utterly—all that they have—and spare them not—but slay man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass:" all this shewed that there was no option left him, no discretion; but that the whole was to be executed according to the

^a Deut. xxv. 17—19.

command. Yet behold, through pride and covetousness he departed from the command, sparing Agag, to grace his triumph; and preserving the best of the flocks and herds, to enrich himself and his people. Thus by executing the command in part, and violating it in part, he shewed, that he made his own will, and not the will of God, the rule of his conduct. And what was this but rebellion against the Most High? It was justly so characterised by Samuel: and such is the interpretation which God will surely put on such conduct, wheresoever it be found. To be “partial in the law” is, in fact, to set aside the law; and to “offend against it willingly in any one point, is to be guilty of all^b” — — —]

2. A stubbornness—

[Saul, on meeting Samuel, took credit to himself for having fulfilled the will of God^c. Thus it is that sin *blinds the eyes* of men, and puffs them up with a conceit of having merited the divine approbation by actions which in their principle and in their measure have been radically wrong.

Samuel, to convince him of his sin, appealed to “the bleating of the sheep, and the lowing of the oxen:” but Saul, with stubbornness of heart, persisted in avowing his innocence: yea, after the strongest remonstrances on the part of Samuel, authorized as they were, and commanded, by God himself, he still maintained, that *he* had done *his* duty, and that *the people only* were to blame; nor were *they* materially wrong, since they had consulted no interest of their own, but only the honour of their God^d.

Here we see how sin *hardens the heart* also, and disposes men to resist conviction to the uttermost. Thus it was with our first parents at the first introduction of sin into the world: both of them strove to cast off the blame from themselves, the man on his wife, and the woman on the serpent^e: and how ready *we* are to tread in their steps, every day’s observation and experience will teach us — — —]

Let us next turn our attention to,

II. The reproof administered—

In our eyes perhaps this act of Saul may appear to have been only a slight and well-intentioned error; but in the sight of God it was a very grievous sin: for “rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.” Whatever we may imagine, the neglecting to serve the true God is but little different, in the estimation of our Judge,

^b Jam. ii. 10. ^c ver. 13. ^d ver. 14—21. ^e Gen. iii. 12, 13.

from the engaging in the service of a false god. Hence we find that the reproof administered was precisely such as the occasion called for.

We shall consider it in two points of view;

1. As exposing his sin—

[We are not to imagine that Samuel intended to disparage the sacrifices which God had commanded. The many testimonies which God had given of his favourable acceptance of them sufficiently shewed, that, when offered in a becoming manner, with humility of mind and a view to the Sacrifice which should in due time be offered, they were highly pleasing in his sight. But, if put in competition with moral duties, and substituted for obedience, they are hateful in the sight of God^f. He “requireth truth in the inward parts;” and more values the tribute of a thankful or contrite heart, than the cattle on a thousand hills^g. The excuse therefore that was offered by Saul was only a mockery and an insult to his God. And whoever shall attempt a commutation of outward services for inward integrity of heart and life, or shall think to atone for the want of one by the abundance of the other, will deceive himself to his eternal ruin^h — — —]

2. As denouncing his punishment—

[God had before threatened to deprive him of the kingdom for presuming to offer sacrifices without waiting for Samuel according as he had been enjoined; and now that punishment was irreversibly decreedⁱ. A sign too was now given him, that it should in due time be executed: as he rent the garment of Samuel, whom he endeavoured to detain, so would God rend from him that kingdom, which he was so unworthy to possess^k. This itself was indeed but a slight punishment: but it was emblematic of the loss of God's eternal kingdom; a loss which no finite intellect can appreciate. Yet is that the loss which every creature shall sustain, who by his rebellion offends God, and by stubborn impenitence cuts off himself from all hope of mercy — — —]

We will conclude the subject with some ADVICE arising from it:

1. Learn how to estimate the path of duty—

[We are very apt to think *that* right which is most agreeable to our own wishes; and to lean rather to that which will

^f Isai. i. 11—16.

^h Matt. xxiii. 23.

VOL. III.

^g Ps. l. 8—14. and li. 16, 17.

ⁱ ver. 26.

^k ver. 27, 28.

gratify our pride or interest, than to that which calls for the exercise of self-denial. But we should be aware of the bias that is upon our own minds, and of our proneness to make the law of God bend to our prejudices and our passions. And we may be sure, that if a doubt exist about the path of duty, moral duties must be preferred to ceremonial; and, in general, it will be found safer to lean to that which thwarts our natural inclinations, than to that which gratifies them.]

2. Be open to conviction respecting any deviations from it—

[There is an extreme aversion in us all to acknowledge that we have done amiss. But to be “stout-hearted is to be far from righteousness;” and wherever God sees such a disposition, he will surely abase it¹. We all see in others how ready they are to justify what is wrong, and to extenuate what they cannot justify. Let us remember that we also have this propensity; and let us guard against it to the utmost of our power. Let us rather, if we have erred, desire to find it out, and not rest till we have discovered it. We would not, if an architect were to warn us that our house were likely to fall, go and lie down in our beds without carefully inquiring into the grounds of his apprehension: a sense of danger would make us open to conviction. Let us therefore not be averse to see and acknowledge our guilt before God, lest our conviction of its existence come too late to avert its punishment.]

3. Let your humiliation be candid and complete—

[Saul confessed his sin, but still shewed his hypocrisy by his anxiety to be honoured before men^m. Hence, though Samuel so far complied as to go with him, and to execute on Agag the judgment that had been denouncedⁿ, yet he left him immediately afterwards, and *never visited him more*^o. Oh, fearful separation! The friend who just before had wept and prayed for him all night, forsook him now for ever. From henceforth Saul was given up to sin and misery, till at last the vengeance of an incensed God came upon him to the uttermost. Would we escape his doom? let our humiliation be deep, and our repentance genuine: let us be willing to take shame to ourselves both before God and man; and be indifferent about the estimation of man, provided we may but obtain the favour of a reconciled God^p.]

¹ Jam. iv. 6. ^m ver. 30. ⁿ ver. 32, 33. ^o ver. 35.

^p Saul desired *Samuel* to “pardon him,” ver. 25.

CCC.

GOD INSPECTS THE HEART.

1 Sam. xvi. 7. *The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.*

WHAT a solemn and awful declaration is this! how interesting to every one of us! The generality, it is to be feared, scarcely think of themselves as in the presence of God: whereas his eye is immediately upon our hearts, inspecting the very inmost recesses of them, and marking every imagination of them with a view to a future judgment. The admonition, though arising out of particular circumstances, is general, and deserves from every one of us the most attentive consideration. The occasion of it was this. God having determined to reject Saul from being king over Israel, and to place on the throne one who should fulfil all his will, commanded Samuel to take a horn of oil, and to anoint to the kingly office one of the sons of Jesse the Beth-lehemite. Samuel, the more effectually to cloke the real object of his mission, was directed to offer a sacrifice at Beth-lehem, and to invite to it both Jesse and all his sons. Eliab, the eldest of the sons, came first before him; and Samuel concluded, from his portly mien and his majestic stature, that he must be the person whom God had ordained to the office: but God rectified his mistake, and told him, that HE did not form his estimate after the manner of men; for “men regarded only the outward appearance; whereas HE looked on the heart.” A similar intimation was given to Samuel in relation to seven of Jesse’s sons, who passed before him; in consequence of which, David, the youngest, was sent for, and “was anointed in the midst of his brethren.” There was in *his* heart what God did not see in the heart of any of his brethren. There were in *them* many external recommendations; but *he* “was a man after God’s own heart:” and to his internal qualities God had respect, in appointing him to the kingdom.

Having thus seen the scope of the words as delivered on that particular occasion, we shall proceed to notice,

I. The truth contained in them—

God does inspect the hearts of men—

1. He is qualified to do so—

[“He is light; and with him there is no darkness at all^a.” “His eyes are in every place, beholding the evil and the good^b.” There is no possibility of going from his presence: “if we ascend to heaven, he is there: if we make our bed in hell, behold, he is there also. If we say the darkness shall cover us, the darkness and the light to him are both alike^c.” “All things are naked and opened before him,” just as the sacrifices, when flayed and cut open, were to the inspection of the priest^d. “Hell and destruction are before him; and much more the hearts of the children of men^e.”]

2. He does so—

[“His eyes run to and fro throughout the whole earth^f.” And not only do “his eyes behold, but his eyelids try the children of men^g,” insomuch that he marks with the utmost precision every imagination of the thoughts of their hearts^h. And, to preclude all possibility of mistake, he represents himself as “searching the hearts” of menⁱ, and trying their reins^k, yea, as “pondering their hearts^l,” and “weighing their spirits^m.” This, I say, he does: and it is his exclusive prerogative to do so; as Solomon has told us: “Thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of menⁿ.”]

3. He does so with an express reference to a future judgment—

[Having ordained a future judgment for the express purpose of manifesting the justice and equity of his procedure, he notes every thing in the book of his remembrance, and will “bring every secret thing into judgment, whether it be good or evil^o.” There is not a thought or counsel in the heart of any man which he will not then make manifest, in order to pass his judgment upon it^p. Nay more, as every evil thought brings with it certain consequences, defiling the soul, hardening the heart, grieving the Holy Spirit, and dishonouring

^a 1 John i. 5.

^b Prov. xv. 3.

^c Ps. cxxxix. 7—12.

^d Heb. iv. 13. See the Greek.

^e Prov. xv. 11.

^f 2 Chron. xvi. 9.

^g Ps. xi. 4.

^h Deut. xxxi. 21.

ⁱ Rev. ii. 23.

^k Ps. vii. 9.

^l Prov. xxi. 2.

^m Prov. xvi. 2.

ⁿ 1 Kings viii. 39.

^o Eccl. xii. 14.

^p 1 Cor. iv. 5. Rom. ii. 16.

God, so he will hold us responsible for these consequences, as well as for the evil from whence they proceed. And of this he has warned us, saying, "I the Lord search the heart; I try the reins, even to give to every man according to his ways, and according to *the fruit of his doings*^a."

Such is the truth declared in our text. Let us now mark,

II. Its aspect on our future destinies—

[We have seen that God had respect to the heart of David, when he appointed him to the kingdom. We are not to suppose that David was *by nature* better than other men: for he himself says, that "he was shapen in iniquity, and that in sin his mother conceived him^r." Much less are we to imagine that David was justified before God by any righteousness of his own: for St. Paul assures us, that he was justified solely by faith in Christ, whose righteousness was imputed to him without any works of his own^s. Nor can any of us hope to be exalted to heaven on account of our own superior goodness: for we are all sinners before God; and, if ever we are accepted of him, we must be "accepted in, and through, his beloved" Son, "being found in him, not having our own righteousness, but the righteousness which is of God by faith in him^t." Nevertheless, though none will possess the kingdom *on account of* their own righteousness, none will possess it who have not previously been "made meet for it," and are not truly righteous in their own souls.]

This truth being unquestionable, let me now, like Samuel, summon you all to the Sacrifice which is prepared for you in the Gospel; and let me declare which of you God has ordained to the kingdom of heaven.

Who is this that first presents himself before me? He is *one possessed of exemplary morality*—

[Surely, I say, this is the person whom God has chosen. Behold, how decorous his habit! how amiable his deportment! how unimpeachable his character! Doubtless, I must congratulate you as the happy person to whom I am authorized to declare God's designs of love and mercy.

No, says God: thou hast erred in judgment respecting him: thou admirest him, because of his outward appearance: but I look at the heart: and I command thee to pass him by, because "I have refused him." Blameless as he appears, he

^a Jer. xvii. 10.

^s Rom. iv. 5—8.

^r Ps. li. 5.

^t Phil. iii. 9.

is not accepted of me, because he is trusting in his own righteousness, and not in the righteousness of my dear Son^u. He has "a form of godliness," it is true; but he is destitute of "its power^x." He is ignorant of his own state before me: he fancies himself "rich, and increased with goods, and in need of nothing; whilst, in reality he is wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." He is lukewarm in all that relates to me; and therefore I lothe him, and shall cast him off with abhorrence^y. "He draws nigh to me with his lips; but his heart is far from me^z." I consider him, therefore, as no better than a whited sepulchre, beautiful without, but full of every thing that is offensive within. His self-righteousness and self-complacency render him odious in my sight; and therefore dismiss him: and proceed.]

Whom is it that I behold advancing next? He is the man, no doubt: for *he is one that loves the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*—

[I am in no fear of erring now. Behold, thou believest in Christ! Dost thou not? And thou regardest him as "all thy salvation, and all thy desire." Thou art highly valued, too, in the Church of Christ: thou hast more than mere morality: thou "renouncest all confidence in the flesh, and rejoicest in Christ alone." I congratulate—

Pause, saith the Lord: thou art deceived again. This is not the man whom I have chosen. He has embraced the Gospel, it is true: but "his soul is not upright within him^a." "He has a name to live, but in reality he is dead^b." He has come into the fold: but he climbed over the wall; and is therefore, in my estimation, no better than a thief and a robber^c. He never came in at the strait gate: he was never truly broken-hearted and contrite: he never fled for refuge to the hope that was set before him: he has taken up religion lightly, and he will renounce it lightly: "if tribulation should arise to him on account of the word, he will presently be offended; and in the time of temptation will fall away^d." Dismiss him: for "he has not the root of the matter in him^e;" and therefore is none of mine.]

Now then, I trust, I cannot err: for he whom I now see *has long made an honourable and consistent profession of religion*—

[I think I have long seen thee a regular attendant on the

^u Rom. ix. 31, 32.

^x 2 Tim. iii. 5.

^y Rev. iii. 15—17.

^z Matt. xv. 7—9.

^a Hab. ii. 4.

^b Rev. iii. 1.

^c John x. 7—9.

^d Matt. xiii. 21.

^e Job xix. 28. Matt. xiii. 6.

house and ordinances of God. I have long seen thee a supporter of the Gospel, and a friend of all who profess it. Thou hast withstood many a storm of temptation and persecution; and hast maintained a good profession before many witnesses. Of thee, therefore, I can have no doubt. Draw nigh, and receive the tokens of God's favourable acceptance.

But what do I see here? What! Lord, am I deceived again? Yes; thou still art attracted too much by the outward appearance. He is not the man whom I have chosen. "He has left his first love^f:" he is "a backslider in heart," if not in act; and therefore "shall be filled with his own ways^g." See what a hold the world has upon him; and how all "the seed that has been sown in his heart, is choked, so that he brings forth no fruit to perfection^h!" He gives me but a divided heart, and therefore cannot be accepted of meⁱ. He once embraced my covenant; but "he was not steadfast in it;" "his heart was never right with me^k:" he never "followed me fully." He "says he is a Jew; but he lies^l:" "for he is not a Jew, who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God^m."]

Beloved Brethren, it is not in the power of man to point out, with certainty, which of you shall inherit the kingdom of God. It is probable enough that there is some obscure David, unthought of by man, yet chosen of God, and through grace endued with that integrity of heart, which many, who make a figure before men, are destitute of, and who, though last in man's esteem, shall be first in God's.

But, as the event can be determined ultimately by God alone, let me ENTREAT you all,

1. To examine carefully your own hearts—

[This we are commanded to do; and we should do it with all imaginable fidelity and care. We should not, however, rest in our own endeavours, but should "entreat of God to search and try us, and to see whether there be, unperceived by ourselves, any wicked way in us, and to lead us in the way everlastingⁿ." Desperate is "the deceitfulness of the human heart: who can know it?" There are thousands who "think themselves to be something, when they are nothing^o."

^f Rev. ii. 4.

^g Prov. xiv. 14.

^h Luke viii. 14.

ⁱ Hos. x. 2.

^k Ps. lxxviii. 8, 37.

^l Rev. iii. 9.

^m Rom. ii. 28, 29.

ⁿ Ps. cxxxix. 23, 24.

^o Gal. vi. 3.

Remember, I pray you, not to be too confident of your own state: but, after the strictest search, adopt the modest diffidence of St. Paul, and say, "Though I know nothing by myself, yet am I not thereby justified: but He that judgeth me is the Lord^p."

2. To give yourselves unreservedly to God—

[This is the very improvement which David himself, in his dying counsels to Solomon, teaches us to make of this subject: "Thou, Solomon, my son, know thou the God of thy father, and *serve him with a perfect heart*, and with a willing mind: *FOR the Lord searcheth all hearts*, and understandeth *all the imaginations of the thoughts^q*." God "requireth truth in the inward parts^r:" nor will he accept any, who are not, like Nathanael, "Israelites indeed, and without guile^s." Remember, a kingdom is at stake; and not an earthly kingdom, that shall soon pass away, but a kingdom that shall be possessed for ever. Bear in mind, too, that whomsoever you deceive, you cannot deceive God: and that, whatever you may judge respecting yourselves, or others may judge of you, "God's sentence, and that alone, will stand^t:" for "not he that commendeth himself shall be approved; but he whom the Lord commendeth^u."]

^p 1 Cor. iv. 4.

^q 1 Chron. xxviii. 9.

^r Ps. li. 6.

^s John i. 47.

^t Jer. xlv. 29.

^u 2 Cor. x. 18.

CCCI.

DAVID'S VINDICATION OF HIMSELF.

1 Sam. xvii. 29. *And David said, What have I now done?
Is there not a cause?*

IT is impossible for any man so to conduct himself in this world, as to *avoid* censure: but it is desirable so to act, as not to *deserve* censure. The rule prescribed for us, in Scripture, is this: "Be ye blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world^a." Like our blessed Lord, we must expect to have our words and actions misconstrued by wicked men: but we should labour to be able to say, with him, "Which of you convinceth me of sin^b?" The appeal which

^a Phil. ii. 15.

^b John viii. 46.

David makes to his indignant brother, in my text, is precisely that, which, when blamed by any one for an action that has offended him, we should be prepared to make: "What have I now done" that was deserving of blame? or what have I done, which was not called for by the circumstances in which I was placed?

Let me,

I. Unfold to you David's vindication of himself—

Mark,

1. The blame imputed to him—

[He had been sent, by his father, to inquire after the welfare of his brethren; and he had executed his office with all practicable expedition^c. But, whilst David was conversing with his brethren, Goliath came in front of the Israelitish army, as he had done both morning and evening for forty successive days, to challenge any individual to single combat. David heard his impious defiance, not of Israel only, but of Israel's God, and was filled with indignation against him: and, having heard what honours Saul had engaged to confer on any one who should encounter this giant, he expressed his willingness to undertake the task, and to risk his own life in defence of his king and country. Not that he conceived himself able to cope with this mighty man: but he knew that God was all-sufficient for those who should trust in him; and he doubted not, but that God would give him the victory over this insulting foe.]

For this his brother Eliab severely reprov'd him, imputing his professed zeal to pride and vanity, and a desire to see the battle, which was at that very instant about to commence. He reflected on him, too, as having deserted his proper post, and as neglecting his proper duty; though he knew the end for which he had come thither, and by whom he had been sent.]

2. His vindication of himself—

[Lovely was the spirit of David on this occasion. He did not "render evil for evil, and railing for railing;" but, with meekness and modesty, and yet with a firmness expressive of conscious innocence, he appealed to all around him: "What have I now done? Is there not a cause?" Have I manifested a grief of heart that my nation should be so insulted, and an indignation of mind that Jehovah himself should be thus defied?

Have I expressed a willingness to expose my life in the service of my king, my country, and my God; and is evil to be imputed to me for this? Is there any thing in *this* deserving of blame? Besides, "Is there not a cause" for what I have said and done? Does not the insolence of this haughty champion call for it? Does not the dispirited state of my own countrymen require it? Does not, also, the honour of my God demand it? And is there any time to be lost? In the space of another hour this gigantic foe may be out of reach; or the battle may have begun; and the time for honouring my God, and benefiting my country, may be for ever lost? Why, then, am I to have all manner of evil imputed to me, for that which is in itself most commendable, and which the occasion so imperatively demands?]

David being undoubtedly an example to us in this matter, I shall,

II. Take occasion from it to vindicate those who stand forth as champions in the Christian cause—

They, in their place, must expect to incur censure from an ungodly world—

[Their conduct will be condemned, as unbecoming in persons of their age and station: it will be traced also to pride, and conceit, and vanity, as its real source: and it will be represented as an occasion and a plea for neglecting their proper business in life. The Christian that will serve his Lord and Master with fidelity, shall be sure to meet with some measure of the treatment to which the Saviour himself was subjected: "If they call the Master of the house Beelzebub," let not those of his household hope that they shall be suffered to escape reproach. Even the friends and relatives of a Christian, and especially if he be young, will be among the first to vent their indignation against him: Why should *he* be singular, and venture to adopt a conduct not sanctioned by his superiors? Why should *he*, by his indiscreet forwardness, cast a reflection upon all his brethren as wanting in zeal? Why does he not content himself with discharging his own proper duties, without interfering in matters that are too high for him? What can actuate him in all this, but a vain desire of distinction, or an hypocritical pretension to qualities which he does not possess? In this way shall not his actions only, but his motives also, be judged by those who have not the courage or the piety to follow his example.]

But the faithful Christian may adopt the very appeal which David made to those who censured him—

["What have I now done," that calls for this reproof? Am I to be condemned for manifesting a love to God, and a desire to wipe away the reproach that is cast on Israel? When I see the great adversary of God and man exulting in his might, and putting to flight all the armies of Israel, is it wrong in me to enter the lists against him, and to enrol myself as a soldier of Jesus Christ, to maintain his cause? What, if I be weak and incompetent to the task, is it any evil to confide in God, and to believe that he will "perfect his strength in my weakness?" Methinks, in an undertaking like this, I should meet with encouragement rather than reproof: for in all that I do, in fighting the Lord's battles, I do only what is the duty of every living man, whether he be old or young, and whether he be rich or poor.

I ask too, "Is there not a cause" for all that I have done? Does not the great enemy of God and man carry, as it were, all before him? Is there not a want of bold and intrepid soldiers to face him? Do not even the armies of God's Israel need to be encouraged by some bright example? Does not the king of Israel, by "exceeding great and precious promises," call us to the conflict? and will not the honour that he will award to us be a rich recompence for our utmost exertions? As for David, he might have been preserved, though all his brethren had perished: but who shall live, if he forbear to fight the good fight of faith? Surely, if God's honour be impugned; if his enemies triumph; if we, in our very baptism, engaged ourselves to be soldiers of Jesus Christ, and to fight under his banners; if there be no safety for us but in fighting; and if eternal happiness depend on our maintaining the conflict till we have gained the victory; then "is there a cause" for our most strenuous efforts; and all blame must attach, not to us, who fight, but to those who decline, and discountenance, the combat.]

APPLICATION—

1. Let none be discouraged from engaging in the service of Christ—

[You must expect to "endure hardness, as good soldiers of Jesus Christ," and that your greatest foes will be those of your own household. You know that a martial spirit is infused with care into the minds of those who enlist into the armies of an earthly prince: and shall not the same pervade those who have undertaken to fight the Lord's battles? I say then to all of you, Offer yourselves as volunteers in His service: fear no danger to which you may be exposed: and rely altogether upon Him who has called you to this warfare. "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might:" and

fear not but that you shall be “more than conquerors, through Him who loved you.”]

2. In maintaining your steadfastness, look well to your own spirit—

[Persons do harm when they vindicate themselves in an unbecoming temper and spirit. We are to “instruct in meekness them that oppose themselves.” “A soft answer turneth away wrath^d,” and “he who ruleth well his own spirit, is greater than he who taketh a city^e.” It is impossible not to admire the spirit of David on this occasion: let it be transfused into your minds; and, “instead of being overcome of evil, learn, under the most trying circumstances, to overcome evil with good.”]

^d Prov. xv. 1.

^e Prov. xxv. 28.

CCCII.

DAVID AND GOLIATH.

1 Sam. xvii. 45, 46. *Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand.*

THAT God acts in a sovereign way in the distribution of his favours is a truth to which proud man is very averse: yet does it meet us in every part of the Holy Scriptures. We have seen it in the elevation of Saul to the regal office: it appears also in the selection of David, whom Samuel was ordered to anoint as successor to the throne^a. We behold it now again in raising up David, whilst yet a youth untrained to war, to slay Goliath, from whom all the army of Israel fled. It might rather have been expected that Jonathan, who had already shewn a most extraordinary valour, should stand forth as a champion on this occasion; or at least that some valiant man should have been found in the camp to espouse his country's cause: but God had ordained that David should possess the throne of Saul; and by this means he began to educate, as it were, the youth for his destined office.

^a 1 Sam. xvi. 1—13.

In the words before us we have David's address to his antagonist just on the commencement of his engagement with him : and from them we shall be led to notice,

I. The character of the combatants—

In Goliath we behold a proud, self-confident blasphemer—

[He was of gigantic stature, (above *eleven* feet in height, or, at the lowest possible computation, ten,) and possessed strength in proportion to his size. His armour was such as would have almost borne down a man of moderate strength^b: and, clad in this, he deemed himself invulnerable and irresistible. Hence, whilst he stalked in proud defiance between the two hostile armies, he, in mind and spirit, presumed to defy even God himself.

Characters of this description are by no means uncommon in the world: for, though we behold not in these days men of such extraordinary bulk, we behold the same pride of heart in multitudes around us, who, glorying in their own bodily or intellectual powers, use them only as instruments of aggrandizing themselves, and of insulting God^c.]

David, on the contrary, was humbly dependent on God alone—

[Being sent by his father to visit his brethren, he came to them in the ranks just at the time that this proud blasphemer was challenging the hosts of Israel. Filled with indignation at his impiety, and desirous to vindicate the honour of his God, he manifested a wish to accept the challenge: and, when reproved by his eldest brother, he meekly but firmly persisted in his purpose, saying, "What have I now done? Is there not a cause^d?"

On being brought to Saul, and warned of his incompetency to contend with such a mighty and experienced warrior, he shewed at once what his true motives were, and in whom his confidence was placed. He had before experienced the protection of Heaven, in two conflicts with a lion and a bear, which he had slain, when they rose up against him; and he doubted not but that God would crown him with similar success in his conflict with this uncircumcised Philistine^e.

Saul would have lent him his own armour for the combat: but David found it only an encumbrance; and therefore went forth unarmed, except with a sling, and five stones in his

^b ver. 4—7.

^c Ps. xii. 3, 4. and lxxiii. 6—9.

^d ver. 29.

^e ver. 33—36.

shepherd's bag, confiding, not in any human means, but in the strength of the living God. Hence when Goliath scorned his youthful appearance, and derided his preparations for the conflict, David replied in the words of our text, "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts."

How striking was this contrast! how exemplary the conduct of David! and how illustrative of the spirit in which the true Christian goes forth against his spiritual enemies, and prepares to combat the world, the flesh, and the devil!]

The close of our text leads us to notice,

II. The issue of the conflict—

According to all human expectations it must be decided in favour of Goliath—

[There was, as it should appear, no room for competition between the combatants; the one a youth, a shepherd, unused to war, and destitute, as we may say, either of defensive or offensive armour; and the other, a man of immense strength, trained to war from his very youth, and armed with all that the ingenuity of man could furnish: his armour altogether impenetrable to the stones, with which alone the youth was prepared to oppose him.]

But his strength was weakness, when opposed to the God of Israel—

[The first stone which David cast at him, was directed by an unerring arm, and an almighty power: it pierced the forehead of Goliath, and in a moment realized the youth's prediction. Thus was the proud boaster "delivered into David's hand;" and David, unprovided with any sword of his own, took the sword of his adversary, and with it cut off his head. And no sooner did the Philistines behold their champion dead, than they fled from Israel with terror, and yielded themselves an easy prey to their pursuers.]

We forbear to suggest the various reflections naturally arising in the mind from this event, because God himself has told us,

III. The design of the dispensation—

It was intended,

1. For the instruction of the world—

[Men in general think but little of God; and because they do not see him, they are ready to suppose that he does not interfere in the affairs of men. They imagine that they may set at nought his authority, and pour contempt on his

people, with impunity: and, if left, like Goliath, to prosper for a season, their presumption is proportionably increased^f. But God is no unconcerned spectator of his creatures' conduct: he marks down every thing in the book of his remembrance; and will vindicate his own honour at the appointed season; perhaps in that moment, when his adversary conceives himself most secure.

Think of this, ye who abuse your strength to the purposes of criminal indulgence, and who vaunt of your excesses in wine or debauchery of any kind. Think of this also, ye who oppose and deride religion. Remember whom it is that you are insulting. Goliath thought that he was defying Israel; but his defiance was in reality hurled against Jehovah himself. So you, though probably unconscious of it, are in reality fighting against God himself. And "will you continue to provoke HIM to jealousy? Are you stronger than HE?" "Will you be strong in the day that he shall deal with you? or will you thunder with a voice like his?" Ah, cease from this warfare, and cast down the weapons of your rebellion, and humble yourselves, while yet the sword of vengeance is unsheathed. Behold Goliath prostrate on the ground, a monument of human folly, and human weakness! Behold him placed for a monument to all succeeding ages, that "God resisteth the proud;" and that "him who walks in pride, He is able to abase!" God delivered him into David's hand *on purpose* that "all the earth might know that there is a God in Israel^g."

2. For the consolation of God's Israel—

[Great and mighty are the enemies of God's people; and most unequal is the contest in which they are engaged. They may well say, "We have no power or might against this great company that cometh against us." But in this dispensation God has especially provided for their encouragement: he gave success to David, that "all the assembly of his people might know, that the Lord saveth not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's^h." In HIM must be our trust: in his strength must we go forth against our enemies: we must "be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might." We must arm ourselves with the weapons which he has provided; and though they appear to the eye of sense to be as useless as a sling and stone, yet shall they be made effectual through his power. Let us "take hope as our helmet, righteousness as our breast-plate, truth for our girdle, the Gospel of peace for our greaves, faith for our shield, and the word of God for our sword," and we need not fear either men or devils; for "He

^f Eccl. viii. 11.

^g ver. 46.

^h ver. 47.

that is in us, is greater than he that is in the world," and "we shall be made more than conquerors through Him that loved us." Gird yourselves then to the battle, expecting "God to perfect his own strength in your weakness." Whoever, whether of friends or enemies, may attempt to divert you from your purpose, go forward: and remember, that as the eyes of both the hostile armies were fixed on David and Goliath, so is there "a cloud of witnesses" anxiously observing youⁱ. O, "quit yourselves like men," and soon you shall have cause to say, "Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"]

ⁱ Heb. xii. 1.

CCCIII.

SAUL'S ENVY OF DAVID.

1 Sam. xviii. 9. *And Saul eyed David from that day and forward.*

THERE is not a baser principle in the human heart than envy. If we notice the connexion in which it is usually mentioned in the Scriptures, we shall see at once what an hateful disposition it is. St. Paul, speaking of the state of mankind by nature, says, they are "full of *envy*, murder, debate, deceit, malignity^a:" and again, shewing what may be the state even of the Christian world, when distracted by contentions and disputes, he says, "lest there be debates, *envyings*, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults^b." In these two passages we behold it drawn to the very life; in the one, as restrained within certain limits by the mounds of a religious profession; and in the other, as breaking down every restraint, and inundating the whole man. For an illustration of it in all its most odious characters, we need look no further than to the passage before us; where Saul is represented as giving himself up entirely to its dominion. In order to set it before you in its true colours, we shall consider,

I. Its grounds—

^a Rom. i. 29.

^b 2 Cor. xii. 20.

[Envy is a grudging to another the possession of some good, which we ourselves affect: I say, of some *good*; for no man wishes *evil* to himself: the object therefore that excites the passion of envy must be *good*. It need not indeed be really and intrinsically good; it is sufficient if it be good in the estimation of the person who beholds it. In Saul, envy was excited by the praises which were bestowed on David on account of his success against Goliath: the women, whose office it was to celebrate great actions with songs and music, ascribed to David the honour of slaying myriads of his enemies, whilst they spoke of Saul as slaying only thousands. This mark of distinction was painful to the proud heart of Saul, who could not endure that another should be honoured above himself. It is precisely in the same way that envy is called forth by distinctions of every kind. Any endowments, whether natural or acquired, are sufficient to provoke this passion in the breasts of men. Beauty, courage, genius, though they be the gifts of nature, and therefore not any grounds of glorying to the persons who possess them, are yet greatly envied by those who wish to be admired for those qualities. In like manner, the attainments acquired by skill and diligence, together with the wealth or honour consequent upon those attainments, are objects which universally inflame this malignant passion. It must be observed, however, that this passion is called forth only where some degree of rivalry exists. A physician does not envy the triumphs of a warrior, or the success of a great lawyer; nor do *they*, on the other hand, envy *his* advancement to the summit of his profession: it is in their own line only, and towards those with whom there exists some kind of competition, that these feelings are excited: and it is by watching the motions of our hearts in reference to persons so circumstanced, that we shall detect the workings of this passion within us.

This passion may exist, not in individuals only, but in bodies of men; as, for instance, in schools, or colleges, or universities, or kingdoms: for, as every one may be said to possess a share of that honour which belongs to his own peculiar party, every one must feel an interest in exalting that party, and a proportionable degree of pain when its honours are eclipsed.

Strange as it may appear, religion itself may be made an occasion of bringing into exercise this vile passion: for though no envious person can delight in piety on its own account, he may desire the reputation attached to it, and consequently may envy him who really possesses it. What was it but Abel's superior piety, and the tokens of God's favour vouchsafed to him, that instigated Cain to imbrue his hands in his blood? We are expressly told also, in the history before us, that when Saul saw that David behaved himself very wisely, and that God

was with him, he feared and hated him the more^c. And why was the Apostle Paul so hated and persecuted, not only by the avowed enemies of Christianity, but by many also who professed to reverence the Christian name? Was it not that his light shone more bright than that of others; and that the success of his labours was proportionably increased? Yes; it was owing to this that the Jews were filled with envy, when they saw the multitudes which sought to avail themselves of his instructions^d; and that less popular ministers in the Christian Church laboured to undermine his influence, “preaching Christ even of envy and strife,” that by so doing they might draw over to themselves his converts, and so “add affliction to his bonds^e.”]

Having seen the grounds from whence it springs, let us next consider,

II. Its operations—

[In the history before us, as contained in this and the two following chapters, we behold this passion in as strong a point of view as it can well be placed. From the moment that Saul became enslaved by it, he was so blinded as not to behold the excellence of David's character; so hardened as to be insensible to all the obligations which he, and the whole nation, owed to him: and so infatuated, as to seek incessantly his death. Repeatedly did he endeavour to destroy David with his spear. When he had failed in these attempts, he sought to ensnare David by engaging him to marry his eldest daughter, and then giving her to another; and afterwards by inducing him to expose his life to the sword of the Philistines in order to obtain his younger daughter in marriage. When he was disappointed in this also, he issued an order to Jonathan and to all his sons to kill David: and, when convinced of the injustice of this command, and pledged in a solemn oath to recede from his wicked purpose, he again renewed his attempts to murder him; and sought to gratify himself with seeing the murder effected, if not of perpetrating it with his own hand: and, when he did not succeed in that, he still pursued the fugitive to Naioth, where Samuel dwelt, sending different messengers, and at last going himself, to apprehend him; and even attempting to destroy Jonathan himself for pleading his cause.

Now we grant that such effects as these are very rare; for, in truth, very few have it in their power to pursue the object of their envy with such murderous and unrelenting rancour as Saul. But the *tendency* of this passion is the same in all: it produces in all a permanent aversion to the person, so that the

^c ver. 12, 14, 15, 28, 29.

^d Acts xiii. 45. and xvii. 5.

^e Phil. i. 15, 16.

very sight of him is painful, and occasions a desire, if possible, to bring him down to a level with ourselves. Like Saul, "we shall *eye* him from that day, and forward." His worth and excellence will be so far from pacifying our wrath, that it will rather augment it; and the brighter his character shines, the more shall we be offended at it. "Envy is" justly said to be "as rottenness in the bones^f;" the disease lies deep; it creates uneasy sensations throughout the whole man; and is out of the reach of any common remedy. Though it may not operate so powerfully as to excite a desire to kill him that is the object of it, yet it invariably so affects the mind as to dispose us to detract from his merits, and to rejoice in his misfortunes. Nay more, we shall be ready, if not by overt act, yet at least by secret connivance, so to lower him in the estimation of others, as to prepare the way for the more easy exercise of their hostility towards him: and then shall rejoice in his fall, pleasing ourselves that it has been accomplished without any intervention on our part: and, if he be removed by death itself, it will excite the feeling of satisfaction rather than of pain and grief.

Well is this represented by Solomon as one of the greatest evils upon earth, and as stamping "vanity and vexation of spirit" upon all things here below, that "for a good work a man is envied of his neighbour^g." For, however "cruel and outrageous wrath" may be, it may be withstood; but "who," says Solomon, "can stand before envy^h?"]

Happy shall we be if, by any prescriptions we may offer, we may be enabled in any degree to promote,

III. Its cure—

No conduct on the part of those who are the objects of it can eradicate envy from the hearts of others. They may indeed put a veil, as it were, over their own virtues, so as to give less occasion for the exercise of envy; but nothing that they can do can prevent the disposition from being cherished by those around them. But we may all impede its influence over our own hearts;

1. By contemplating the vanity of earthly distinctions—

[How poor and empty are those vanities which men so greatly affect! The satisfaction arising from wealth or honour is far less than people generally imagine. Only let us reflect

^f Prov. xiv. 30.

^g Eccl. iv. 4.

^h Prov. xxvii. 4.

with what difficulty honours are obtained; with what pain and trouble they are often accompanied; how easily they are blasted; how little they can do for us under pain or sickness; and how soon they are terminated by death; and we shall see that they are unworthy the anxiety with which they are sought, or the regret with which they are lost. From such a view of them David exhorts us to look with indifference on the advancement of others, and to content ourselves with the pursuit of honours that shall never fade, and of happiness that shall never disappoint our most sanguine expectationsⁱ — — —]

2. By cultivating the knowledge of our own hearts—

[If we envy others, it is from an idea that we ourselves deserve the honour that is conferred on them. But, if we knew the extent of our own demerit, as we are viewed by an holy God, we should rather account the lowest possible degree of honour above our desert; yea, we should rather be filled with wonder and with gratitude, that we are not held up as objects of execration and abhorrence. This would lead us willingly to “take the lowest place;” and consequently would lay the axe to the root of that accursed principle, which makes the elevation of others a ground of our own disquiet — — —]

3. By seeking a thorough conversion unto God—

[This alone will be attended with complete success. When the heart itself is renewed after the divine image, these hateful qualities will be banished from it. Hence this is the prescription which the inspired writers give for the first removal of the disorder^k, and for the subsequent prevention of its return^l.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who indulge this malignant spirit—

[The natural man is universally in a greater or less degree under its influence^m: and, though lightly considered by the world at large, it is an evil which will exclude from heaven every person that is under its dominionⁿ. O that the guilt and danger of it were more generally and more deeply considered!

But experience proves that even professors of religion may in a very awful degree be led captive by it. What shall we say of such? what, but that “they are carnal, and walk as men?”

ⁱ Ps. xxxvii. 1—4.

^k Rom. xiii. 13, 14.

^l 1 Pet. ii. 1, 2. Prov. xxiii. 17. Gal. v. 16.

^m Tit. iii. 3. Jam. iv. 5. ⁿ Gal. v. 20, 21. ^o 1 Cor. iii. 3.

Whence is it that so many dissensions and disputes arise in the Church of God, and are often carried to such a fearful extent? Is there nothing of this principle at work? Is not this "the root of bitterness that springs up and defiles them?" Yes: St. James gives us the true account, both of the principle itself, and of its operation in the Church: he tells us also, what will be the bitter consequence of yielding to its influence^p. Let those who pretend to piety, look well to their own hearts, and tremble lest, while their "voice is Jacob's voice, their hands be the hands of Esau." The true line of conduct for a Christian is that of Jonathan; who, knowing that he should be eclipsed by David, yet sought by all possible means to protect his person and advance his interests. Let Jonathan's character, as here portrayed, be contrasted with that of Saul, and be ever before our eyes for daily imitation — — —]

2. Those who are the objects of it—

[Marvel not, ye holy and circumspect Christians, if your characters be traduced by envy and detraction. "They that render evil for good will be against you, because you follow the thing that good is^q." You must not expect to be treated better than your Lord and Master was. But study the character of David: see how meekly he bore his injuries: see how studiously he rendered good for evil: see how he "walked wisely before God in a perfect way." This is a conduct worthy to be followed, and shall assuredly bring with it an abundant recompence.]

^p Jam. iii. 14—17.

^q Ps. xxxviii. 20.

CCCIV.

DAVID'S FEAR OF SAUL.

1 Sam. xx. 3. *Truly as the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death.*

IT is justly said, that "oppression maketh a wise man mad^a." One there was, who endured it in every form, and to its utmost possible extent; and yet never uttered an unadvised word, or betrayed a temper which his bitterest enemies could condemn: Jesus, after years of persecution, could give this challenge to his enemies, "Which of you convinceth me of sin?" But fallen man, however upheld for a season, has generally betrayed his weakness when

^a Eccl. vii. 7.

his trials have been heavy and of long continuance. We admire the conduct of David in many respects, and think him on the whole a very exalted character; but yet, on some occasions he fainted, and yielded to unworthy apprehensions respecting the final issue of his troubles. Such was the state of his mind when he uttered the words which we have just read; and which, though containing a general and acknowledged truth, were not such as he would have uttered, if he had not given way to desponding fears.

We shall consider the words in this two-fold view;

I. As a general and acknowledged truth—

The general representations which are given of life in the Scriptures, strongly mark its shortness and uncertainty—

[It is light, and unsubstantial in itself as “*a vapour*^b,” its length is but as “*an hand-breadth*^c,” the rapidity with which it passeth away is compared to “*a post*,” in which the utmost possible despatch is used; or to “*an eagle hasting to its prey*^d.” Such is its extreme vanity, that it is like “*a dream*^e” or “*a shadow*^f,” and so short does the whole of it in a retrospect appear, that it is “*but as yesterday when it is past*^g.” How justly then may it be said, that there is but a step between us and death!]

It must be regarded in that light by all persons without exception—

[Age or sickness may give some additional force to the expression in our text; but neither the youngest nor the most vigorous has any more certainty of life than the feeblest of mankind. Disease or accident may assault one as well as another; so that none can “boast of to-morrow; for we know not what a day may bring forth.” So numerous indeed are the instances of persons removed suddenly, or in the very midst of life, that we cannot but acknowledge the truth and awfulness of the declaration before us.]

But, to obtain a just view of our text, we must regard it,

II. As an assertion arising out of the peculiar circumstances of David at that time—

^b Jam. iv. 14.

^c Ps. xxxix. 5.

^d Job ix. 25, 26.

^e Job xx. 5.

^f Ps. cii. 11.

^g Ps. xc. 3—6.

[In this view it was the dictate of unbelief. We blame not David for using with all diligence the means of safety : for if he had neglected to use all just precautions under an expectation that God would fulfil his word at all events, he would have tempted God ; just as our Saviour would have tempted him, if he had cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple. But when God had assured him that he should possess the throne of Israel, and had actually confirmed the appointment by a sacred unction, it became David to give credit to the word of God, and to rest assured, that neither men nor devils should eventually disannul it. There was indeed such malignity in the heart of Saul, that nothing but Omnipotence could prevent the execution of his plots against David : but David should have known that "there is no might or power against the Lord," and that "the counsel of the Lord shall surely stand : " and in the confidence of this, he should have been satisfied that Saul could not prevail against him. However just therefore his expressions were as applied to men in general, we cannot approve of them as applied to his own case : he should not have said, "I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul^h," but rather, "Since God is for me, who can be against meⁱ?"]

Having thus obtained a just and accurate view of the words before us, we may enter more largely into THE IMPROVEMENT which should be made of them. We may notice from them,

1. How frail the best of men are, when brought into heavy trials—

[On the whole, David's faith was remarkably strong : but here it failed ; and, if it had not been strengthened from above, he would utterly have fainted. This he himself acknowledges, after he had recovered from this momentary depression^k. It has justly been observed, that all the most eminent saints in Scripture have failed in that very grace for which they were most renowned : Abraham, the great pattern and example of faith, repeatedly denied his wife through unbelief : Moses, the meekest of the human race, "spake unadvisedly with his lips:" and Job, whose patience is proverbial, "cursed the day of his birth." Thus all have been left to shew, that their strength was not in themselves ; that, if left, they were weak as other men ; and that it is in God only that any just confidence can be placed : "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool."

Let us bear this in mind, both for our humiliation and our encouragement. If we have been enabled to maintain a holy

^h 1 Sam. xxvii. 1. ⁱ Rom. viii. 31. ^k Ps. xxvii. 1, 3, 5, 13.

and consistent conduct, let us remember that it is "by the grace of God we are what we are;" and if we are tempted to look up to the saints of old as soaring to heights that can never be attained by us, let us remember, that the grace which wrought effectually for them, is equally sufficient for us; and that "we also can do all things through Christ strengthening us."]

2. What is the proper use and office of faith—

[Faith is not to supersede, but to encourage, our own endeavours, and to assure us of our successful termination of them. When to human appearance the difficulties are insurmountable, then is the season for faith to shew itself, and "against hope to believe in hope." This was the operation of Abraham's faith: he considered not the age of himself or of his wife, which precluded all hope of issue in the natural way, but expected that God would effect by miracle what could be effected in no other way. Doubting neither the power nor the veracity of God, he was willing to wait God's time, and confident that he should not be disappointed of his hope¹. Had David's faith wrought thus on this occasion, it would have borne him up amidst the waves of trouble that rolled over him in quick succession.

This then is what we recommend to all. Are you bowed down with a sense of guilt? Lay hold on that promise, that "Christ will in no wise cast out any who come unto him." Are you assaulted with grievous temptations? Remember who has said, that "you shall not be tempted above that ye are able, but that you shall have a way to escape, or be enabled to bear it." Do your corruptions appear invincible? Rely on him who has said, "My grace is sufficient for you." And, if your troubles are of such a magnitude as to menace your immediate destruction, rest yourselves on the promise of Jehovah, that "all things shall work together for your good." Be satisfied that "He is faithful who hath promised," and that "not a jot or tittle of his word can fail."]

3. What is the wisdom of every child of man—

[None of us have any such warrant to expect a continuance of life as David had; and therefore his observation respecting the shortness and uncertainty of life should be admitted in its utmost force. Ignorant then as we are whether the very next step may not carry us into the eternal world, we ought to inquire with ourselves, Whether it would take us to heaven or to hell? O what a thought is this! What madness is it not to dwell upon it more than we do, or to delay for a moment

¹ Rom. iv. 20, 21. and Heb. xi. 17, 19.

our preparation for the eternal state! We would call on all of you; *the aged*, who know for a certainty that their time cannot be long; *the sick*, who are warned by the disorders that are yet upon them; *the young*, who are in the prime and vigour of life; we would entreat all without exception to stand ready for death and judgment. O beloved, "prepare to meet your God." Think of the multitudes that have been summoned to his tribunal unprepared; and be thankful that there is yet one step between you and death. The Lord grant that, whenever that step be taken, you may have an abundant entrance into the realms of bliss^m!]

^m Mark xiii. 33—37.

CCCV.

DAVID'S FORBEARANCE TOWARDS SAUL.

1 Sam. xxiv. 4—6. *And the men of David said unto him, Behold the day of which the Lord said unto thee, Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand, that thou mayest do to him as it shall seem good unto thee. Then David arose, and cut off the skirt of Saul's robe privily. And it came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt. And he said unto his men, The Lord forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the Lord's anointed, to stretch forth mine hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the Lord.*

KNOWING what we do of the depravity of human nature, we should scarcely conceive that men could attain to such heights of virtue as are recorded in the Holy Scriptures, if we did not know that those records are of divine authority. This observation is verified in the history of Abraham, of Moses, and of David also, who, though a very faulty character in some respects, was in other respects a star of the first magnitude. We are called on the present occasion to notice his conduct towards Saul; and to consider him under a three-fold relation;

I. As a subject towards his prince—

[Never had man more just occasion to withstand his prince than he: the inveteracy with which Saul laboured to destroy him was incessant^a——Yet how did David act towards him? God had now placed Saul within his power; (for Saul lay down to sleep in a cave where David and his men were

^a See the three preceding chapters.

concealed:) but David would not touch him: yea, though importuned by his own men, and urged to consider Saul's exposed situation as an indication of the divine pleasure, he not only would not smite Saul with his own hand, but would not suffer any one else to smite him: and even when, for the fuller discovery of his own innocence, he had cut off the skirt of Saul's robe, his conscience smote him as having offered an indignity to his sovereign: so tenderly did he regard not only the life, but the honour also, of his prince.

In this he was a pattern to all succeeding ages: for though the different governments of the world give different degrees of power to the supreme magistrate, and of liberty to the subjects, yet in every country under heaven must the magistrate be considered as God's representative on earth, and must be "obeyed, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake"^b — — — Under circumstances of an unfavourable nature, there should be a readiness in us to palliate, rather than to expose and aggravate, his misconduct; and a willingness rather to submit to evils, than by violent resistance to endanger the welfare of the community. The character of Christian subjects is, that they are "the quiet in the land."]'

II. As a saint towards his oppressor—

[The injuries done to David were really "for righteousness' sake." Like Jesus, of whom he was an eminent type, "he was hated without a cause." This consideration must have added ten-fold poignancy to all his afflictions. To be conscious that he was continually labouring to cut off all occasion of offence, and yet to find himself persecuted with unrelenting fury, was most distressing to his mind. Yet, as Saul himself confessed, he returned nothing but good for evil^c.

But such is the true line of every Christian's duty. We should "not render evil for evil to any man^d," but rather love our enemies, and do them good^e. This is the true way to soften the hearts of our enemies, and to ensure a final victory over them^f— — —]

III. As a believer towards his God—

[As to avenging himself, David knew that God was the Judge of all, and would in due time vindicate his righteous cause, and punish his unrighteous oppressor: to God therefore he left what belonged to God alone^g. Moreover, though God had promised him the kingdom, he left God to fulfil his promise in his own time and way. Doubtless he felt great distress

^b Rom. xiii. 1, 2, 5.

^c ver. 17.

^d 1 Thess. v. 14.

^e Matt. v. 44.

^f Compare ver. 16. with Rom. xii. 20, 21. ^g ver. 15.

of mind under all his trials; but he committed himself to God in prayer, and looked for deliverance from him alone^h.

Thus, however great and complicated our trials be, we should take no hasty stepⁱ, but “commit ourselves to God as a faithful Creator^k,” and expect assuredly the final accomplishment of all his promises¹ — — —]

^h The 57th Psalm was written on this very occasion. See the title, and ver. 1—6. In ver. 6. he seems to refer to the very event in our text: Saul came to destroy David, and inadvertently exposed himself to be destroyed by David.

ⁱ Isai. xxviii. 16.

^k 1 Pet. iv. 19.

¹ Ps. xxxvii. 5, 6.

CCCVI.

DAVID KEPT FROM AVENGING HIMSELF ON NABAL.

1 Sam. xxv. 32, 33. *And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: and blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand.*

THE fidelity of the sacred historians is observable in every part of the divine records. A partial friend, or a person who was unduly concerned about the honour of religion, would have cast a veil over the facts which are contained in this chapter. They are, it must be confessed, extremely humiliating, and constrain us to exclaim, “Lord, what is man!” In the general we behold “the man after God’s heart” acting with a holy consistency, and meriting the character of a most exalted saint: but here we see him rushing to commit the most horrid iniquities, and restrained only by the special intervention of God’s providence.

In contemplating the history before us, we shall see,
I. What evils men would commit if left to themselves—

We wonder not at the churlishness of Nabal: such characters are common; men, who, in point of temper, are “such sons of Belial, that a man cannot even speak to them^a,” and whose every act constrains you to associate with their names the idea of folly^b. They

^a ver. 17.

^b ver. 25.

are worthless in themselves, yet contemptuous towards others: they are profuse and intemperate in convivial entertainments, but hard-hearted and niggardly in reference to the indigent and distressed. But,

We are amazed at the cruel resentment of David—

[The provocation which he had received was certainly great. He had been the greatest benefactor to his country. He was persecuted only for righteousness' sake. Though driven to great straits, he had never suffered his soldiers to relieve his wants by plunder. He had afforded a protection to Nabal's property and servants, without any remuneration whatever. He was peculiarly in want of necessary provisions at this time: and from the preparations which Nabal had made for his feast he might have been supplied without any material inconvenience. His message to Nabal was most courteous and kind: yet was Nabal's answer insolent in the extreme.

This however did not justify such fierce resentment as David manifested. He might justly have complained of Nabal; perhaps in his circumstances he might have been justified in demanding as a right what had been refused him as a gift: but to think of murdering Nabal, of murdering also every male belonging to him, was as atrocious a design as ever entered into the heart of man. Who would have conceived that such a thought should ever enter into the mind of him, who had so recently spared his most malignant enemy, and had been condemned in his own conscience for even cutting off the skirt of his master's garment?]

It shews however what corruption there is in the human heart—

[Truly the heart of man is "desperately wicked." Even though renewed by divine grace, we are no longer able to stand, than whilst we are upheld by God himself. However long we may have persevered in holy obedience, we are yet liable to fall; and however great the temptations which we have withstood in times past, we have no security but that we may be overcome by the smallest. Yea, there is nothing so vile, but we may be led to commit it, if we be not every moment strengthened from on high. Who can contemplate the fall of Noah after his deliverance from the Deluge, and of Lot after his exemplary piety in Sodom, and not tremble for himself, lest he be overcome in an unguarded hour? "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall."]

The subject further leads us to notice,

II. How much we owe to God for his providential restraints—

David expresses his obligations to God for delivering him from this temptation—

[A servant of Nabal, fearing the effects of his master's message, informed his mistress of the whole transaction; bearing testimony at the same time to the kindness and integrity of David's conduct: and Abigail immediately adopted the most prudent methods of pacifying David's resentment. Without loss of time she took a liberal portion of the provisions that had been prepared for the feast, and went with them herself to meet David. Happily she met David in the way; and by her consummate address completely disarmed his wrath, and averted the calamity which would have speedily ruined her whole family. Instantly David recognized in her the divine interposition; and, whilst he blessed her for her advice, he blessed God for sending her to obstruct his bloody and vindictive purposes. It is worthy of observation, that David took scarce any notice of her liberality which supplied his present wants, but fixed his whole attention on the deliverance which he had experienced from his own relentless fury: and well might he bless God for that interposition, whereby he was preserved from the blackest crime he could have perpetrated, and possibly too from the penal consequences of it to all eternity.]

And have not *we* also reason to adore our God for similar restraints?

[Let us reflect on our past experience, even in relation to revenge. Have we never had our minds so irritated and inflamed, as to feel a readiness to avenge ourselves? And are we sure, that if a murderous instrument had been at hand, we should not have used it? Have not others yielded to that temptation, who were to all appearance as little exposed to it as we: and can we be certain that a little further provocation would not have produced the same effect on us?

But let us inquire also in reference to other sins. Have criminal desires never risen so strong in our hearts, that we have owed it rather to some providential restraints, than to our own abhorrence of iniquity, that they were not actually fulfilled? We have witnessed often enough the falls of others: and to whom must we ascribe it if we ourselves have not fallen in like manner? Must we not say with the prophet, "Thou, Lord, hast wrought all our works in us?" Truly, if we would call to mind the various temptations which we have

at any time experienced, and the various methods which God has used for our deliverance, we should behold such evidences of his paternal care, as would fill our hearts with wonder, and our mouths with praise.]

Such are the reflections arising from a *general* view of our subject. From a more *particular* inspection of it we may LEARN,

1. What a dreadful evil is revenge—

[There is nothing so cruel, but a vindictive spirit will impel us to it. Whilst under the influence of revenge, we overlook all consequences: we think nothing of the misery which we may entail on persons that are innocent. David was not content with murdering Nabal, but would murder also every male belonging to him, though not one of them was a partaker of Nabal's fault. Thus the incendiary, or the duellist, contemplates not for a moment the miseries he may inflict on others; the welfare of a whole nation would be of no account in his eyes, when compared with the gratification of his revenge^d. O let us guard against the first risings of this malignant passion^e! let us bear in mind, that vengeance is not our prerogative, but God's^f: and let us seek rather that noblest of all victories, "the overcoming of evil with good^g."]]

2. What a blessing is a faithful monitor—

[David could scarcely express the obligation he felt to Abigail for her heavenly counsel^h. And what reason have *we* to be thankful for the instructions of our parents, the counsels of our friends, and the admonitions of our ministers! We shall never know from what evils we have been preserved by them, till the whole book of God's remembrance shall be opened to us. In the same light we may view those various circumstances of our life which may have appeared most calamitous. The loss of our health or property may have been thought afflictive at the time; but who can tell what he might have perpetrated, if these messengers of mercy had not been sent to arrest him in his course? Let us then receive as from the Lord all those persons or events, which may lead us to reflection. Let us in particular be thankful for reproof; and bear in mind, that almost any other person is a more competent judge of the propriety of our conduct, than we ourselves can be under the impulse of any strong passion. If our friend possess the wisdom and address of Abigail, let us value

^d Preached on May 14, 1812, being three days after Mr. Perceval's assassination.

^e Prov. xix. 11.

^f Rom. xii. 19.

^g Prov. xxiv. 29. and xxv. 21, 22.

^h *Thrice* he blesses her, and God for her.

him the more; but, if not, let his advice be nevertheless welcome to our mind; and let him be highly esteemed by us in proportion to his fidelityⁱ.]

3. What need have we all to pray against temptation—

[We may, like David, have withstood the greatest trials, and yet fall, like him, by those which are comparatively light. We are far from being at all times alike. We have not a stock of grace at our own command: it is not the light of one hour, or of one minute, that will suffice for the next; nor is it any measure of grace already received, that will enable us to stand fast in the Lord. We must receive fresh communications every moment, and look continually to the Lord for guidance and support. Let us then beg of God to “hedge up our way with thorns^k,” and, if preserved by him from falling, let us acknowledge him as the only source of our stability^l.]

ⁱ Prov. ix. 8, 9. and xxv. 12. and xxviii. 23.

^k Hos. ii. 6, 7.

^l Ps. xxvi. 12. and xli. 12, 13.

CCCVII.

THE UNBELIEVING FEARS OF DAVID.

1 Sam. xxvii. 1. *And David said in his heart, I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul.*

OF the dispositions of men their fellow-creatures can judge only by external signs, either in word or deed: but God discerns them as they exist in the inmost recesses of the heart, and puts a just construction upon every motion there. It does not appear that David had disclosed to any one his feelings on the occasion before us: but the all-seeing God has told us what was the language of his heart: “David said in his heart, I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul.”

It will be a profitable subject for our consideration, if we inquire,

I. In what light we should regard these fears of David—

Beyond all doubt, there was great occasion for fear—

[*The malignity of Saul against him was deeply rooted. From the moment that Saul heard persons celebrating the*

slaughter of ten thousands by David, whilst they ascribed the slaughter of only thousands to him, he “*eyed him* from that day, and forward^a.” The benefit which David had conferred in the slaughter of Goliath was of no account in his mind; so rancorous is “envy, even as rottenness in the bones^b.” Even on the very morrow after this victory did Saul “cast his javelin at David, to smite him to the wall:” yea, twice was this effort made by Saul for his destruction; and “twice,” as it were by miracle, “did David avoid the stroke^c.”

Bent on the destruction of David, *Saul had recourse to every expedient he could devise*. He offered him his elder daughter to wife, and afterwards his younger daughter Michal; and set his servants to work upon his ambition to accept the offer, on purpose to involve him in war with the Philistines, that so he might fall by their hands^d. And when David had accomplished double the task imposed upon him, it only provoked the enmity of Saul so much the more against him^e. Not having succeeded in this device, he “ordered Jonathan his son, and all his servants, to kill David^f,” which, if Jonathan had not made it known to David, would, by one or other of them, have been effected. And when, by the expostulations of Jonathan with his father, the order was revoked, and safety was guaranteed to David under the sanction of an oath, yea, and when fresh services to a vast extent were rendered by David, still did Saul’s heart burn with rage against him, inso-much that he again cast a javelin at him to destroy him, and sent messengers to watch and assassinate him in his own house^g: and to the fidelity of his wife alone he owed his preservation^h. Still, with relentless fury, did this blood-thirsty monarch pursue him, with three successive bands of murderers; yea, and he himself also followed with a fourth, to seize and destroy himⁱ: yet, notwithstanding the clearest possible interposition of God in his behalf, did Saul still determine upon his death^k, and even cast a javelin at his own son for presuming to intercede for him^l. And when David had fled to Gath, and in his way had obtained from Ahimelech the priest, under pretext of being on urgent business from Saul himself, some temporary supply of food, together with Goliath’s sword, Saul, on hearing of it, slew no less than eighty-five priests by the hand of Doeg his informant, and then smote the whole city also with indiscriminate rage, “both men and women,

^a 1 Sam. xviii. 7—9.

^c 1 Sam. xviii. 11.

^e 1 Sam. xviii. 25, 27, 29.

^g 1 Sam. xix. 4—11.

ⁱ 1 Sam. xix. 18—24.

^l 1 Sam. xx. 32, 33.

^b Prov. xiv. 30.

^d 1 Sam. xviii. 17—25.

^f 1 Sam. xix. 1.

^h 1 Sam. xix. 11—17.

^k 1 Sam. xx. 31.

children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep, with the edge of the sword^m."

Besides his own immediate servants, *Saul had traitors in confederacy with him, and armies to execute his murderous projects.* The men of Keilah, a fortified city, which David, with great prowess, had saved from the Philistine armies, instead of requiting his kindness to them as they ought, would have betrayed him into the hands of Saul, if David had not escaped from themⁿ. "*Every day did Saul seek him*" with indefatigable vigilance; so that he must have fallen, if God had not, as it were by miracle, preserved him^o. David had concealed himself in a wood, in the wilderness of Ziph: and the Ziphites, instead of affording him protection, voluntarily offered to deliver him into the hands of Saul, if he would come down to take him: and, in the wilderness of Maon, whither David had taken refuge on a rock, did Saul actually encompass him with his armies, and would have apprehended him, but that he was forced suddenly to abandon his enterprise, in order to repel an invasion of the Philistines. With no less than three thousand men did Saul pursue him, as soon as he had rid himself of the Philistine invaders; so determined was he not to rest till he had slain David^p.

But that which most of all shews the reason which David had for fear, is, that *Saul persevered in his efforts, amidst all imaginable checks, both from God, and from his own conscience.* In the wilderness of En-gedi, David and his men were hid in a cave. Saul, unconscious of any danger, went into that very cave wherein they were: and David, unperceived by Saul, who possibly might have lain down to sleep, cut off the skirt of Saul's robe; and then followed him out of the cave with the skirt in his hand, and shewed him how easily he might have put an end to the contest by the destruction of Saul himself. On that occasion the murderous tyrant was overcome with gratitude; and with tears acknowledged, that his enmity against David was unmerited in the extreme^q. Who would suppose, that, after such kindness, this wicked monarch could ever again renew his murderous attacks? Yet, on the Ziphites again tendering their traitorous services, did Saul go down again to the wilderness of Ziph with three thousand men to seek him: and there again did he experience, at the hands of David, the same forbearance as before; and had the same decided evidence of it given him as before, by seeing the very spear that was at his bolster, and the cruse of water that was near it, in the hands of David, who might have slain him with the

^m 1 Sam. xxii. 18, 19.

ⁿ 1 Sam. xxiii. 5, 12, 13.

^o 1 Sam. xxiii. 14.

^p 1 Sam. xxiv. 2.

^q 1 Sam. xxiv. 4, 8, 16, 17.

same facility that he had taken them^r. On this occasion, Saul, a second time, acknowledged the injustice of his conduct towards David, and foretold that David would ultimately prevail^s. But how was it possible for David to place any reliance on the professions of such a man? or, when the enmity of Saul was so rooted, so inveterate, so active, so widely diffused, and so continually persevering, how could David, who was the object of it, do any thing but fear, and anticipate at last a fatal issue? It is but justice to the character of David to state thus minutely the grounds he had for fear, more especially because we are constrained to say, that,]

Nevertheless, in entertaining desponding fear, he sinned—

[God had promised to David that he should sit upon the throne of Israel^t: and it was not in the power of man to make void the divine decree. Indeed, God had already shewn, by his various interpositions in his behalf, that under his protection we are safe, even though men and devils should combine their efforts to destroy us. David should have remembered this, and not suffered any thing to shake his faith in God. I mean not to say, that it was easy to exercise faith under such circumstances, and to preserve unruffled composure in the midst of so many perils: conscious of our own infirmity, we can easily make allowance for him: but the point we have in hand is, to determine the quality of David's conduct on that occasion: and we are constrained to say, that he should have, like his great progenitor, "against hope, believed in hope"; and have believed, that though he were actually slain, God would rather raise him again from the dead to sit on the throne of Israel, than suffer one jot or tittle of his word to fail^x. Thus it was that Abraham acted in reference to Isaac: and thus should David also have been "strong in faith, giving glory to God^y."]]

But that we may bring this matter home to our own bosoms, it will be proper to inquire,

II. What similar apprehensions we have to guard against—

God has given to his people promises of exaltation to thrones of glory. But they also are surrounded with many enemies, and are exposed to many and severe conflicts. Hence they also are sometimes over-

^r 1 Sam. xxvi. 5—16.

^s 1 Sam. xxvi. 21—25.

^t 1 Sam. xv. 28, 29, and xvi. 12. with Ps. lxxxix. 19—24.

^u Rom. iv. 18.

^x Heb. xi. 17—19.

^y Rom. iv. 20.

come with desponding fears; and are ready, "in their hearts" at least, "to say, I shall one day perish by the hands of my great enemy." Now it is no uncommon thing to hear the parallel drawn between David and them; and to infer, from the sinfulness of David's fears, a corresponding sinfulness in theirs. That we may enter justly into the comparison, I will state,

1. The correspondence there is between the cases—

[God has doubtless given us "a covenant ordered in all things and sure:" and his promises are so "exceeding great and precious," that we may well rest upon them with most unshaken affiance. In that covenant, God provides for our acceptance with him, through the blood of his dear Son; for our renovation after his own divine image, through the influences of his good Spirit; for our perseverance in the ways of holiness even to the end, and for our final admission to his heavenly kingdom. He assures us, that he will "never suffer any one to pluck us out of his hands:" and, because we may well suspect the effect of our own weakness, he engages "never to depart from us to do us good; and to put his fear into our hearts, that we may never depart from him^a." This covenant He has even "confirmed by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for him to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge, to lay hold on the hope set before us^b."

But, on the other hand, our conflicts with our spiritual enemies are exceeding heavy, and with little intermission. The world, the flesh, the devil, are all confederate against us; and are diversifying their attacks in endless variety, whilst within our own bosoms there are traitors ready at all times to deliver us up into the hands of our enemies. Thousands of times are we saved from them, almost as by miracle: and enemies, which we thought were slain, rise up against us with renewed vigour; whilst Satan, baffled in one assault, goes and takes with him seven other spirits, mighty as himself, to renew the contest — — —

Is it to be wondered at, then, if the saints are sometimes discouraged, and ready to fear that they shall one day perish by these continual assaults? Or can they be considered as sinning against God, if they sometimes give way to desponding apprehensions?]

To answer this, I will proceed to state,

2. The difference between the cases—

^z John x. 28, 29.

^a Jer. xxxii. 40.

^b Heb. vi. 17, 18.

[David was confessedly and altogether wrong: for the promises which had been made to him were *personal*, and were irrespective of any moral qualities in him: but those which are made to us, pertain to *characters only*; and then alone become ours, when we attain the character to which the promises are made. For instance: not a promise in the whole book of God belongs to us, till we repent and believe the Gospel: so that, before we can actually apply the promises to ourselves with an assurance of our interest in them, we must inquire whether we have come to God in his appointed way. To expect the accomplishment of them to our souls without this, were presumption: so that, to ascertain the precise quality of our feelings, we must inquire carefully, what is the special ground of our fear. If we are afraid lest God should forget his promises, or leave us to perish, notwithstanding we trust in him, our belief is highly criminal: but, if we doubt whether we have really come to Christ in his appointed way, we may be doing the very thing which our situation most imperiously calls for. "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves," is a divine command: and, till we have an evidence in ourselves that we have fled to Christ for refuge, any confidence of our acceptance with God would be a fatal delusion. The truth is, that men's difficulties on this subject have arisen, in a great degree, from not distinguishing properly between the graces of faith and hope: *faith* has respect to the word of promise; and to be weak in the exercise of it, is highly sinful: but *hope* has respect to the thing promised; and that ought to vary according to the evidence which there is of our title to it. If, therefore, we would judge how far our state of mind really corresponds with that of David, we must bear in remembrance this necessary distinction, and apply it to our state as occasion may require.]

Let me, then, IMPRESS upon your minds these necessary HINTS:

1. Learn to distinguish between what is good and what is evil, in Christian experience—

[Distinguish carefully between faith and presumption, on the one hand; and between fear and unbelief, on the other. That which many *call* faith, is nothing but an unfounded confidence of their own acceptance with God: and a greater curse cannot befall us, than the attainment of such a faith as that. On the other hand, that which many *call* unbelief, is a sense of our liableness to fall and perish: and a greater blessing than that cannot be bestowed on any child of man. To

all *I* say, and to all GOD says, "Be not high-minded, but fear:" for "blessed is the man that feareth always." Of GOD's power or willingness to save you, it is not possible to be too fully assured: but of your own actual acceptance with him, your assurance must be in exact proportion to the evidence of it which is displayed in your life and conversation — — —]

2. Let your anticipations be under the influence of faith—

[Whatever GOD has spoken in his word, shall surely come to pass. Now the word of GOD has said, that "except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven:" "Except ye repent, ye shall all perish:" "He that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of GOD abideth on him:" "Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord." Now you may anticipate the salvation of every penitent and believing saint, as surely as if you saw him in heaven; and the damnation of every impenitent and unbelieving sinner, as surely as if you saw him already in hell. This, indeed, must be taken into the account, that it is supposed they retain their characters; for otherwise they shall actually change their respective dooms: the man who becomes righteous shall reap the fruit of his righteousness; and the man who departs from his righteousness, shall perish under an accumulated load of guilt and misery. This is GOD's own express declaration^d; and his dealings with men in the last day shall be in strict and uniform accordance with it. Our ways may be unequal: but "his are, and shall be equal^e."]

3. Let nothing operate to drive you *from* GOD—

[David said, "There is nothing better for me, than that I should speedily escape into the land of the Philistines^f:" and for this he is generally condemned, and perhaps justly too: though I cannot forget, that our Saviour, under somewhat similar circumstances, was carried by divine direction into Egypt. But respecting *us* there can be no doubt. Every thing must drive us rather *to* GOD, than *from* him. Persecution, temptations, yea, even sin itself, must have this effect. We have no refuge whatever, but in GOD: and if, like Jonah, we were in the belly of hell itself, we must cry unto him. Then "shall all things eventually work together for good." Our very fears shall tend to keep us from undue confidence, and constrain us to cast ourselves more entirely upon GOD. And, if once they produce this blessed effect, we may rest assured, that not all the universe combined "shall ever separate us from his love^g."]

^d Ezek. xviii. 26—28.

^e Ezek. xviii. 29.

^f Text.

^g Rom. viii. 38, 39.

CCCVIII.

THE WITCH OF ENDOR.

1 Sam. xxviii. 15. *And Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up? And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams: therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do.*

THAT such a thing as witchcraft has existed, we cannot doubt: but what were the incantations used, or what power Satan had to work with and by them, we know not. Certain it is, that in the days of our Lord, Satan appears to have had a greater influence over the bodies of men than he possesses at this time: and as that was permitted of God for the more abundant display of Christ's power, so it is probable that an extraordinary influence over the minds of men may, through the divine permission, have been sometimes exerted by Satan, that the evil tendency of that influence might be the more clearly seen, and the excellence of the divine government be more justly appreciated. As for the various instances of witchcraft recorded in uninspired books, we can place no dependence whatever upon them; because there is often an undue degree of credulity even in great and good men, and a readiness to receive any report that is marvellous, without sufficiently examining the grounds on which it stands. But what is recorded in the Scriptures we may well believe; because it is revealed by One who cannot err. The account given us of the witch of Endor is one of the most remarkable in the Scriptures; though there are in it some difficulties, which have occasioned a diversity of opinions among the learned respecting it. That, however, we may place it before you in an easy and instructive point of view, we shall consider the history of Saul connected with it; and particularly,

I. The state to which he was reduced—

This he himself specifies in the words of our text—

[Long and obstinately had he continued to sin against the convictions of his own conscience; till at last he had provoked God to depart from him. Whilst he was forsaken of his God, the Philistines made war against him, and invaded the land. Then he felt the need of an Almighty Protector, and sought to obtain direction and help from his offended God. But now God would not be found of him, or take any notice of his supplications. In various ways had God been wont to communicate his mind; but now he would return "no answer, either by Urim, or by a prophet, or by a dream."]

Such, alas! is but too frequently the state of ungodly men—

[Many there are who violate habitually the dictates of their own conscience, till they "vex," and "grieve the Holy Spirit," and utterly "quench" his sacred motions. No wonder if at such times trouble come upon them: for indeed the whole creation are ready to "avenge the quarrel of God's covenant," whensoever he shall withdraw from us his protecting hand: and whatever our trials be, or from whatever quarter they come, they will be incomparably heavier, from the consciousness that "God himself is become our enemy." Under their trials the most hardened of men will begin to relent, and will "pour out a prayer when God's chastening is upon them"— — — "When God slays them, then they will seek him," as the Psalmist says. But at such seasons they are often made to feel what "an evil and bitter thing it is to forsake the Lord." They call upon God, but "he will not hear them, because their hands are full of sin^a:" yea, he even "laughs at their calamity, and mocks when their fear cometh^b." He has repeatedly declared, that thus he would treat all who should "set up idols in their hearts^c:" and melancholy indeed is their state, who have no access to God in their troubles, nor any communications from him for their supports. Yet we can have but little acquaintance with the house of mourning, if we have not met with many such cases in the world.]

Such was the unhappy state of Saul. Let us next proceed to notice,

II. The expedient to which he resorted—

Now he wished for the counsel of that minister, whom when living he neglected and despised;—and,

To obtain an interview with Samuel, he had recourse to a witch—

^a Isai. i. 15.

^b Prov. i. 26—28.

^c Ezek. xiv. 1—7. and xx. 1—3. with Ps. lxvi. 18.

[In former days Saul had exerted himself, agreeably to God's command^d, to banish witchcraft from the land; and now could not prevail on this woman to use her enchantments, till he had profanely sworn that no punishment should be inflicted on her. At his earnest entreaty, she prevailed to bring up Samuel before him. Many learned men have thought that Samuel himself did not appear, but that Satan assumed his shape and garb. But there is no intimation in the history that this was the case; on the contrary, every expression has directly the opposite aspect: and it seems that even the witch herself was beyond measure astonished at the unexpected success of her incantation. It is urged on the other hand, that a witch could never prevail to bring Samuel from the grave, or his soul from the mansions of the blessed. True; but God might see fit to send Samuel on this occasion, to confirm all the threatenings which he had denounced when living: nor is there any weight in the objection, that he speaks of being "disquieted," and "brought up," because this was only popular language suited to the prevailing notions of the day: and when he speaks of Saul and his sons being "*with him* on the morrow," he can only mean, that they should be removed into the invisible world by death — — — It seems clear, that, as God afterwards sent a living prophet to reprove Amaziah's application to the heathen idol, so now he sent a departed prophet to reprove in Saul a similar offence^e.

But what availed this interview with Samuel? Samuel himself put the question to Saul, "Wherefore dost thou ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy?" Vain indeed was that hope which sought in a broken cistern what the fountain alone could supply.]

And equally vain are those refuges to which sinners flee, when they are forsaken by their God—

[Men in a time of trouble will catch at any thing for comfort. Some will endeavour to drown reflection in the cares or pleasures of the world; whilst others take refuge in infidelity: but not even Saul's expedient was more vain than these: for what is there either in business or pleasure to satisfy a guilty conscience? or what can infidelity adduce to disprove the truths which it would set aside? "In uttering error against the Lord, we only make empty the soul of the hungry, and cause the drink of the thirsty to fail"^f — — — Such are the expedients, whatever they may be, whereby we labour to supply the place of an offended God — — —]

^d Lev. xx. 27.

^e Compare 2 Kings i. 1—6. where the cases, and *the issue of them*, are much alike.

^f Isai. xxxii. 6.

From the close of the history we learn,

III. The misery he brought upon his own soul—

Great indeed were his disappointment and distress—

[Behold the melancholy train; dejection, desperation, suicide! He fainted and fell as soon as ever he heard the fate that awaited him: and was with great difficulty persuaded to take such refreshment as was necessary for his support. But no humiliation of soul did he manifest; nor, as far as we see, did he present to God one single petition. He sank down in sullen desperation, determining to meet his fate, but using no effort to obtain mercy at the hands of God. The battle terminated according to the word of Samuel; and Saul himself, to prevent the mortification of falling alive into the hands of his enemies, fell upon his own sword, and put a period to his own existence^g.]

But such are generally the effects of seeking in the creature what can be found in God alone—

[Many are oppressed with great dejection of mind: but if they would search out the causes of their trouble, they would find it generally to spring from lusts unmortified, and iniquities unrepented of. And how often does dejection lead to despair! Strange as it may seem, it is easier to abandon oneself to an hopeless despondency, than to renounce beloved sins, and persevere in an earnest inquiry after God. Yes; the heart, instead of relenting, is more generally “hardened through the deceitfulness of sin;” and when we begin to say, “There is no hope,” then we add, “I have loved idols, and after them will I go.” The close of all is, in too many cases, suicide: men finding no relief in God, fly to death itself as the only remedy for the troubles of life. Ah! unhappy men, who venture thus to rush into the presence of that God, who has hid his face from them!]

Let us LEARN then to BEWARE,

1. Of impenitence in sin—

[Many who, like Saul, have been hopeful in their beginnings, fall from one sin to another, till they set both God and conscience at defiance. But however sweet sin may be in the mouth, it will prove as gall in the stomach. It will destroy all peace of mind, all hope in God, all prospect in eternity. O let it not be harboured in our hearts! Whatever our besetting sin be, let us never rest till we have repented of it, and washed it away in the Redeemer's blood, and obtained the victory

over it through the power and grace of God. If not purged out, it will defile and destroy our whole souls.]

2. Of seeking help in the creature—

[God is the only refuge of sinful man: wherever we may look, there is no help for us in any other. Not only are men and devils unable to assist us; even all the angels in heaven would be incapable of affording us any effectual help. Whatever creature we rest upon, it will prove only “as a broken reed, which will pierce the hand that rests upon it.” We must learn in every difficulty to say with Jehoshaphat, “Lord, I have no power against this great company that cometh against me, neither know I what to do; but mine eyes are upon Thee^h.”]

3. Of giving way to despondency—

[To despair, is to seal our own condemnation. We must never conclude, that, because God has forsaken us, “he will be no more entreated.” Had Saul himself truly and unfeignedly implored mercy at his hands, God would not have utterly cast him off. “God never did, nor ever will, say to any, Seek ye my face in vainⁱ.”]

^h 2 Chron. xx. 12.

ⁱ Judg. x. 10—16.

CCCIX.

ENCOURAGEMENT IN GOD.

1 Sam. xxx. 6. *But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.*

IN seasons of prosperity the superior happiness of a Christian is not visible to all, but in adverse circumstances he has a manifest advantage over others. The ungodly, when the cisterns from whence they draw their water are broken or emptied, have no comfort left: but when every stream is dried up, the godly have still access to the Fountain itself. This was experienced by the Church of old^a, and it is beautifully exemplified in the history before us. David was in great trouble, being suspected by the Philistines, plundered by the Amalekites, and threatened by his own soldiers: but in the midst of all he encouraged himself in God.

We shall shew,

^a Hab. iii. 17, 18.

I. What reason he had to do so—

Though reduced to the greatest extremities, David derived encouragement,

1. From the perfections of God as revealed in the word—

[He was no stranger to the character of God as it was revealed to Moses^b, or to the unnumbered illustrations of it which the history of his nation afforded him: consequently he knew that there was nothing too hard for God to effect, or too great for him to give.]

2. From the experience which he himself had had of God—

[The lion, the bear, the Philistine giant, and the murderous rage of Saul, had given him abundant proofs of God's superintending providence^c: these he called to mind in this season of trial and distress^d, and wisely judged, that, with such a Friend on his side, he had no cause for fear^e.]

3. From the covenant which God had made with him—

[God had covenanted with him to give him the throne of Israel; hence he was assured that his life should be spared till this promise was accomplished. It was in this view that he was enabled to call God HIS God; and the thought of this relation to God added ten-fold confidence to his soul.]

While we admire the conduct of David in this particular, let us consider,

II. What reason we have to do likewise—

Certainly the grounds of David's encouragement are equally calculated for our support—

[*God is still the same* almighty and gracious Being as ever: his arm is not shortened, nor is his ear heavy with respect to us. We may also see much of his goodness *in our own experience*. Wonderful have been the ways in which he has dealt with us for the awakening, preserving, and sanctifying of our souls. He has *also covenanted with us* that "he will never leave us nor forsake us^f," nor shall one jot or tittle of his word ever fail. Are not these then grounds of encouragement to us as well as to David?]

^b Exod. xxxiv. 6, 7.

^c 1 Sam. xvii. 37. xviii. 11. and xix. 10, 11.

^d Ps. xlii. 6. lxxvii. 10, 11. ^e 2 Cor. i. 10.

^f Heb. xiii. 5.

But we have far greater reason to encourage ourselves in God than David had.

We have seen more stupendous displays of God's *power*—

[David had read of the wonders wrought in Egypt and the wilderness: but what were these wonders when compared with the victories gained over all the passions and prejudices of the world by the preaching of a few poor fishermen?]

We have beheld more astonishing exercises of his *love*—

[The history of the Jews records many instances of God's love towards them: but what were these when compared with the gift of his dear Son to die for us, and of his Holy Spirit to renew us? These things are as much beyond any thing that David had ever seen, as the substance is beyond the shadow.]

We have experienced more abundant proofs of his *faithfulness*—

[How many promises, made to the Church at large, have been accomplished by the mission of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit! And all the members of the Church, from its first establishment to the present moment, have found the promises of the Gospel fulfilled to them in their season! In proportion therefore as God's faithfulness has been tried and ascertained, our confidence in him must be increased.]

APPLICATION—

1. Let us endeavour to secure God as *our* God—

[Unless God be ours, we can have but little reason to encourage ourselves in him. Let us then look to Christ, that through him we may find acceptance with God; so shall God be our Friend, our Father, and our “eternal great Reward^g.”]

2. Let us encourage ourselves in God—

[We must expect to meet with many difficulties and troubles: nor can we find any grounds of encouragement in ourselves, but in God there is all that we can either need or desire. Are we then discouraged by outward difficulties or inward corruptions? let us direct our eyes to him, as our compassionate, almighty, and ever faithful Friend. Let us, like David, chide our unbelief^h; and henceforth say with him, “In the day of my trouble I will call upon Godⁱ.”]

^g Gen. xv. 1. John i. 12. 2 Cor. vi. 18.

^h Ps. xliii. 5.

ⁱ Ps. lxxxvi. 7.

2 S A M U E L.

CCCX.

THE DEATH OF ABNER.

2 Sam. iii. 31—34. *And David said to Joab, and to all the people that were with him, Rend your clothes, and gird you with sackcloth, and mourn before Abner. And king David himself followed the bier. And they buried Abner in Hebron; and the king lifted up his voice, and wept at the grave of Abner; and all the people wept. And the king lamented over Abner, and said, Died Abner as a fool dieth? Thy hands were not bound, nor thy feet put into fetters: as a man falleth before wicked men, so fellest thou. And all the people wept again over him.*

AFTER the death of Saul, David was anointed king in Hebron: but still he reigned over one tribe only; for Abner had prevailed on the other eleven tribes to adhere still to the house of Saul, and to make Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, their king. From the disinterestedness and forbearance which David manifested during all the persecutions which he experienced from Saul, we can have no doubt but that he would have rested satisfied with the government of one tribe, till God in his providence should open the way for the full possession of the throne of Israel: but Ishbosheth and his adherents accounted David an usurper, and therefore waged incessant war with him for seven years^a. At last however a circumstance occurred, which seemed likely to effect the promised union of all the tribes under David as their head. Ishbosheth had offended Abner by accusing him of illicit intercourse with a concubine of

^a 2 Sam. ii. 10, 11. with 2 Sam. iii. 1.

Saul : and Abner, filled with resentment, determined to transfer his allegiance to David, and to carry over all the eleven tribes with him. Ishbosheth, knowing that Abner's influence would effect this measure, acquiesced in it, and submitted to the terms prescribed by David as a preliminary to the league which should be made between them : he sent and took Michal, Saul's daughter, from Phaltiel her husband, and gave her up to David, from whom she had been wrongfully withheld. Every thing was now ready to be carried into execution : Abner had succeeded in his conference with David, and nothing remained but to bring over the heads of the eleven tribes to the plan proposed. But behold, the treachery of Joab defeated and destroyed the plan. Joab, just returned from an expedition against the Philistines, heard what Abner had done ; and immediately expostulated with David on his credulity, for suffering Abner so to impose upon him : and then, sending privately in David's name to Abner, as though some further communication with him was wanted, he met Abner on his return, and took him aside, and slew him.

This murderous act of Joab's, together with its attendant circumstances, will furnish us with some very useful, and, at this time, seasonable^b, observations.

We observe then,

- I. That there is no crime so atrocious, but a person under the influence of a vindictive spirit will commit it—

[Revenge was the principle from which Joab, in concert with his brother Abishai, acted on this occasion^c: Abner had slain his brother Asahel ; and they sought to avenge his death. But if they had candidly considered, they might have found in this matter an occasion for gratitude rather than resentment : for Abner had exercised towards Asahel a forbearance and tenderness that could not reasonably have been expected ; nor

^b Just after the assassination of Mr. Perceval, before the presenting to the Prince Regent the Address from Cambridge.

^c ver. 27, 30.

had lifted up a hand against him till the last extremity^d. They were blinded however by their own passion, and overlooked every thing for the gratification of it. Joab never once reflected on the baseness of the action he was about to perpetrate, nor on the loss which David and the whole nation would sustain, nor on the account which he should one day give of it to God; but with horrid treachery, and deliberate cruelty, plunged the dagger into the side of Abner.

Alas! alas! how awfully has this scene been renewed amongst us! It was no political animosity, but revenge alone, that instigated the murderer to the commission of his crime. Under the influence of that infernal passion he proceeded in the most deliberate manner to execute his cruel purpose. Thoughts of mercy and compassion found no place in his bosom. The injury that would be done to a fellow-creature, (who would in one instant be hurried into the presence of his God;) the bereavement that would be felt by all his family, and the loss that would be sustained by the whole nation, (a loss to all appearance irreparable;) seemed to him as nothing, when weighed against the gratifications of revenge: nay, the thought of his own account that he should have to give at the judgment-seat of Christ could interpose no bar to the execution of his design. Yea, after the perpetration of the deed, he justified his act, and, like Joab, continued impenitent to his dying-hour.

Ah! what an evil is revenge! What need have we to guard against the very thought of it rising in our hearts! Truly, we know not to what an extent the inundation may reach, when once the smallest breach is made in the dam that obstructs this current^e.]

We all are called upon at this time to mourn on the sad occasion: for it is certain,

II. That the crimes of individuals will be imputed to us as national, if they be not nationally reprobated and deplored—

[Of this David was aware; and therefore he endeavoured to avert the guilt from the nation, by calling on them all to humble themselves before God, and to express in penitential sorrow their abhorrence of the crime^f. On this occasion he himself set them the example: he mourned, he wept, he fasted: he followed the corpse to the grave: he poured out the most pathetic lamentations over it; reflecting with just severity on the atrocity of the crime; and lamenting that he had not power to inflict punishment on the offenders^g: and it was greatly to

^d 2 Sam. ii. 20—23.

^f ver. 28, 29, 31.

^e Prov. xvii. 14.

^g ver. 33, 34, 35, 39.

the honour of his people that they participated so deeply in his affliction. All approbation of the crime was thus formally disavowed; and the guilt of it was made to rest on him who had committed it.

We rejoice that an universal abhorrence of the assassination has been expressed in our land: or, if there have been any so abandoned to all sense of duty both to God and man as to approve the deed, they have made themselves partakers of the crime, and contracted in the sight of God the guilt of murder. We would however remind you all, that this should be a season of deep humiliation amongst us, and of earnest prayer. We must mourn over the deed, and wash our hands in the blood of our great Sacrifice, if we would not have the guilt of blood imputed to us, or visited upon our land^h.]

It is some consolation to us however to consider,
 III. That whatever obstructions arise, God's purposes shall surely be accomplished—

[The establishment of David on the throne of Israel was now nearly completed; yet in the very moment of its completion, as it were, was it counteracted by this horrid crime; the influence that was to accomplish the measure was destroyed; and the rival monarch deterred from his purpose. No prospect now remained but that of continued war: and the very counsels of Heaven appear to have been defeated. But God's counsel shall stand, though the expected instrument of its accomplishment be taken out of the way, and the greatest obstacle to its accomplishment remain. Accordingly in an unlooked-for way the point was effected, and the promise made fifteen years before to David, was fulfilled.

We did hope, that by the elevation of him, whose loss we deplore, to the government of this country, God had designs of mercy toward us: and we have reason to adore our God for the benefits which through his instrumentality our nation has received. Such a character, all things considered, has rarely been seen at the head of our affairs; for piety is but a rare associate with political power. But, if the channel of God's mercy is withdrawn, the Fountain still is full; and if we plead with him to pour out his benefits upon us, he will yet find other channels through which to communicate them to our land. True it is, that this is a season of uncommon difficulty, and the political horizon is gloomy in the extremeⁱ: but we hope that our nation shall yet be preserved a blessing to the

^h Deut. xxi. 1—9.

ⁱ No person being found to take the lead in our government; and new difficulties arising, by means of Russia being just about to be again involved in war with France.

world; and that all the efforts which are making for the enlarging of our Redeemer's kingdom, and which were sanctioned and aided by him whom we have lost, will yet be honoured with success. "The wall is to be built in troublous times:" "the kingdoms of the world shall become the kingdoms of the Lord and of his Christ:" and, though darkness should yet increase upon us, we hope and trust that "in the evening time it shall be light."]

But though God's counsel shall stand, we are not the less accountable to him for our actions; nor can we doubt but,

IV. That however men may escape punishment in this world, their sins shall be recompensed in the world to come—

[To that tribunal David looked forward, when he saw that "the sons of Zeruiah were too hard for him;" and he found consolation in the thought, that "the Lord would reward the doer according to his wickedness^k." It was a misfortune to him to have a subject so powerful, that he could set the laws at defiance. Through the goodness of God, the laws of our land are enforced; and the atrocious act that has been committed has met with its deserved recompence. But there are sins of a less heinous nature, which are committed daily with impunity. Let us not however suppose that they will be unnoticed by the Judge of quick and dead. The vindictive thought will there be noticed, as well as the vindictive act; yea, and the impure desire also, as well as adultery itself: for God will bring into judgment every secret thing, whether it be good or evil. Nor will there be any respect of persons with him. *Now* there is a kind of partiality in favour of the rich and great; evils are allowed in them, which, if committed by persons of the lower class, would be reprobated and abhorred: but the high and the low will hereafter be equally tried by the unerring standard of God's law, and be judged "according to what they have done in the body, whether it be good or evil." Let not the hope of impunity therefore encourage any man to sin; for God has warned us, that "though hand join in hand," (yea, though earth and hell should unite for the protection of any,) "the wicked shall not pass unpunished."]

^k ver. 39.

CCCXI.

UZZAH'S PUNISHMENT FOR TOUCHING THE ARK.

2 Sam. vi. 6—9. *And when they came to Nachon's threshing-floor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God. And David was displeased, because the Lord had made a breach upon Uzzah: and he called the name of the place Perez-uzzah to this day. And David was afraid of the Lord that day, and said, How shall the ark of the Lord come to me?*

THE noblest use of power is to exert it for God. So David thought: for no sooner had he attained the quiet possession of the throne of Israel, than he determined to bring up the ark of God from Kirjath-jearim, where it had remained in obscurity perhaps for seventy years, and to place it in Jerusalem, where it might receive the honour due unto it. But, as persons striving in the Grecian games “were not crowned except they strove lawfully,” and conformed to the rules prescribed for them, so neither can *they* be accepted who exert their influence for God, except they use it agreeably to the dictates of His revealed will. Accordingly in this very act David met with a repulse: the person whom he employed to bring up the ark was struck dead upon the spot; and the whole measure was disconcerted: yea the very frame of David's mind also was changed, from joyous exultation, to vexation, sorrow, and despondency.

Let us contemplate,

I. The punishment inflicted on Uzzah—

Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, having long had the charge of the ark in their father's house, undertook to drive the cart whereon it was to be conveyed to Jerusalem. Ahio went before to prepare the way, and Uzzah drove the oxen: but, when they were arrived at the threshing-floor of Nachon, the oxen by some means shook the ark; and Uzzah,

apprehensive it would fall, put forth his hand to keep it steady: and for this offence he was struck dead upon the spot.

Now at first sight it appears as if this punishment was exceedingly disproportionate to the offence: but we shall be of a very different opinion, if we consider,

1. The offence committed—

[This was of a complicated nature: it was the offence, not of Uzzah only, but of David, and of the whole nation. As it related to Uzzah, it was highly criminal: for God, in the orders he had given respecting the removal of the ark from place to place, had directed that *the priests only* should *touch* the ark, or any thing belonging to it; and that the Levites should carry it: and so strict was this order, that it was enforced by the penalty of death: “The sons of Kohath shall *bear* it (by its long staves;) but they shall not *touch* any holy thing, *lest they die*.” Now Uzzah was not a priest; and therefore he should on no account have presumed to touch the ark. It may well be supposed, that this violation of God’s command was the fruit of an habitual irreverence, which a long familiarity with the ark had nourished in his mind: and therefore God took this occasion of punishing his presumption.

But David, also, and all the nation were to blame: for the very accident that occasioned Uzzah to put forth his hand, arose from their criminal neglect. God had given plain directions about his ark; and had ordered that it should be carried *on the shoulders of the Levites*. The other articles belonging to the tabernacle were large and cumbersome; and for the conveyance of them God had given waggons and oxen; but “to the sons of Kohath he had given none; because the service belonging to them was, to bear the ark upon their shoulders^b.” Why then was this forgotten? Why did David and all the priests and people presume to substitute another way, different from that which God had prescribed? The Philistines, it is true, had sent home the ark in this way: but they knew nothing of the directions given in the law, nor had they any of the sons of Aaron with them to employ in that service. Were these ignorant heathens a fit pattern for David to follow, in direct opposition to the commands of God? If David did not know what God had commanded in relation to the ark, should he not have examined; or should he not have inquired of the Lord, as he had so recently and so successfully done in reference to his conflicts with the Philistines? This neglect

^a Numb. iv. 15.

^b Numb. vii. 6—9.

then was highly criminal, and justly merited the rebuke it met with.]

2. The reason of noticing it with such severity—

[Besides the enormity of the offence, there was additional reason for punishing it with severity, arising out of the very nature of that dispensation. God had shewn himself so gracious and condescending towards that nation, that there was great danger lest they should entertain erroneous notions of his character, and overlook entirely his majesty and greatness. Indeed even his condescension itself would be undervalued, unless they should be made sensible of his justice, his holiness, and his power. Hence on many occasions He had taken care to blend some displays of his power with the manifestations of his love. When he came down upon Mount Sinai to give them his law, he accompanied the revelation with awful demonstrations of his greatness. When he had sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices on his altar, and to declare his acceptance of them, he destroyed Nadab and Abihu by fire for presuming to burn incense before him with fire different from that which he had kindled^c. When a single individual in the nation had offended him, he withdrew his protection from all, till the person was discovered and put to death^d. Thus, he was now suffering the symbols of his presence to be transported to Jerusalem; and the people would be ready to think that they had conferred an honour upon him: he therefore shewed them, that no service could be accepted of him, unless it were regulated by a strict adherence to his revealed will; and that whilst they received from him such signal tokens of his favour, they must at the peril of their souls conduct themselves towards him with the profoundest reverence^e. In this view the judgment inflicted upon Uzzah was an instructive lesson to the whole nation, and is a standing proof that “God is greatly to be feared, and to be had in reverence of all them that are round about him^f.”]

We lament however to observe,

II. The effect it produced on the mind of David—

Truly the best of men are but weak, when they are visited with any heavy trial. Fervent as David's mind was, no sooner was he thus rebuked than he was filled,

1. With proud resentment—

[It is probable that there was in his mind an undue degree

^c Lev. x. 1, 2.

^d Josh. vii. 5, 11, 12.

^e Lev. x. 3.

^f Ps. lxxxix. 7.

of complacency, from the idea that he was the honoured instrument of thus exalting and glorifying his God. To meet therefore with such a check, in the midst of all his glory, and in the presence of all the great men of the nation, was very mortifying to his pride; and in an instant he betrayed what was in his heart. Had he been displeased with himself, it had been well: but "he was displeased" with God, whom he considered as dealing wrongfully and unjustly towards him. Alas! that so good a man should indulge such an unhallowed disposition. Had he himself corrected one of his little children, he would have expected the child to conclude of course, from the very correction itself, that something was amiss in him, though he could not immediately see wherein the evil of his conduct lay: and should not David have exercised that same temper towards God? Should he not have concluded that God was too wise to err, and too good to do any thing which was not strictly right? Should he not have acted, as he did on another occasion, "I was dumb and opened not my mouth, because thou didst it?" It is characteristic of the vilest of men to fly, as it were, in the face of God^g; yea, it is their very employment in hell to curse him for the judgments he inflicts^h. Did such a temper then become "the man after God's own heart?" No; he should rather have said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him goodⁱ;" "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him^k." But in this conduct of his we have a lamentable illustration of that proverb, "The foolishness of man perverteth his way, and his heart fretteth against the Lord^l."]

2. With unbelieving fear—

[He now concluded that God was an hard master, whom it was impossible to serve: he therefore would not venture any more to take to him the ark: "He was afraid of the Lord, and said, How shall the ark of the Lord come unto me?" This was a slavish fear, and utterly unbecoming one who had so often experienced the most signal tokens of his favour. This was to act like the rebellious heads of the tribes, when, in their contest with Aaron for the priesthood, God had decided the cause against them^m: or rather it was a repetition of the conduct of the Philistines upon a precisely similar occasionⁿ. But this was very unbecoming his high character. He should rather have instituted an inquiry into the reason of the divine procedure; and should have humbled himself before God for the errors that had been committed. For this he might have found

^g Isai. viii. 21.

^h Rev. xvi. 9—11.

ⁱ 1 Sam. iii. 18.

^k Mic. vii. 9.

^l Prov. xix. 3.

^m Numb. xvii. 12, 13.

ⁿ 1 Sam. v. 10, 11.

precedents in plenty in the Sacred Records^o: but he yielded at once to despondency, and dismissed the whole assembly of Israel, and left the ark to be taken in by any one that was bold enough to receive it.

Such was his unhappy frame on this occasion: and such, alas! is the temper of many under the chastisements of the Almighty: they are ready to say, “It is in vain to serve the Lord;” there is no hope: I have loved idols, and after them will I go” — — —]

APPLICATION—

1. Let us be especially on our guard, when we are engaged in the service of our God—

[God is a jealous God, and will not be trifled with. The conduct which would be connived at by him among the heathen, will provoke him to anger when observed among those who enjoy the light of revelation: and in proportion as we have the knowledge of him, may a conformity to his will be justly expected of us^p. Happy would it be, if the professors of religion would lay this thought to heart! for, so far are they from having any dispensation from the practice of morality, that a far higher tone of morals is expected of them; they are called upon to “shine as lights in the world,” and to “be holy as God himself is holy.”

And must not this thought be pre-eminently interesting to those who are engaged in the service of the sanctuary? What manner of persons ought *they* to be in all holy conversation and godliness! Sins even of ignorance are highly criminal^q; but most of all in *them*^r. Let those then who “bear the vessels of the Lord be clean^s.” Let a holy fear attend them in all their ministrations, lest, instead of finding acceptance with their God, they bring on themselves the heavier and more signal judgments. Miserable it is to die; but most of all to “*die by the ark of God.*”]

2. Let nothing divert us from the path of duty—

[If, when engaged in the service of our God, we meet with obstacles which we did not expect, let us search to find wherein we have done amiss; but let us not yield to despondency, as if it were impossible to please the Lord. Let us examine the Sacred Records, and pray for the teachings of the

^o Josh. vii. 6. Judg. xx. 26. ^p Amos iii. 2. ^q Lev. v. 17—19.

^r Compare the offerings required in Lev. iv. 3, 13, 14, 27, 28; of the *priest*, a bullock, equivalent to the whole congregation; but of a common person, a female kid.

^s Isai. lii. 11.

Holy Spirit, that “we may know what the good and perfect and acceptable will of God is:” then may we hope for success in our undertakings, and shall have tokens of God’s acceptance both in this world and the world to come^t — — —]

^t This may be applied to *Ministers* with good effect.

CCCXII.

DAVID DANCING BEFORE THE LORD.

2 Sam. vi. 14. *And David danced before the Lord with all his might.*

RELIGION is, indeed, a source of joy. In this light it was viewed by the angelic host, when they proclaimed to the shepherds the birth of our Saviour, saying, “Behold, we bring you glad tidings of great joy!” And thus was it found to be by the converts on the day of Pentecost, the Ethiopian Eunuch, the people of Samaria^a, and by all, in every place, who received the word aright^b. The Psalms of David place this matter beyond a doubt, they being almost one continued effusion of praise and thanksgiving. In the history before us we have an extraordinary exhibition, strongly confirmatory of this truth. David was bringing up the ark of God to Jerusalem; and so strong were the emotions of joy within him, that, in the presence of not less than thirty thousand of his subjects, he danced before the Lord with all his might.

Let us consider,

I. The expressions of David’s joy—

Certainly, at first sight, it appears strange that a monarch, stripped of his royal robes, and clad in the simple habit of a priest, should be dancing thus extravagantly, as it might appear, at the head of all his subjects. But he was serving and honouring his God: and therefore, under any circumstances, his joy would be great. But it was exceedingly heightened,

1. By his reflections upon the past—

[The ark, with the exception of one short interval, had abode at Baaleh, or Kirjath-jearim, for nearly fifty years,

^a Acts viii. 8, 39.

^b Acts xv. 3.

whither it had been carried twenty years after its restoration by the Philistines who had taken it captive. David had greatly desired to bring it up to Jerusalem, where he had prepared a tabernacle for its reception. He ordered it to be put on a new cart, and drawn by oxen, in the manner in which the Philistines had restored it; forgetting that God had given special commands, that none but the Kohathites, who were Levites, should carry it; and that they should never either behold or touch it, but that it should be covered, and they should bear it by means of the staves which were made for that purpose. In its progress, the ark was shaken, at the threshing-floor of Nachon; and Uzzah, one of the conductors of it, put forth his hand to hold it up, lest it should fall: and for this error God struck him dead upon the spot. This judgment was intended as a rebuke, not to Uzzah only, but to all the priests and Levites who were present; and especially to David, who had been so regardless of the divine commands, with which he doubtless was well acquainted, and of which he ought to have been most strictly observant. By this judgment David was disheartened, and he dared not to proceed, lest he himself, also, should fall a sacrifice to the divine displeasure. Accordingly, the ark was turned out of its course, and carried to the house of Obed-edom, the Gittite. But during its continuance there, for the space of three months, such manifest and extraordinary blessings flowed down upon Obed-edom and all his family, that David was assured that God was reconciled towards him: and, inspired with fresh zeal, he proceeded again to bring it up from thence, taking especial care that every thing should be conducted in God's appointed way. After advancing only six paces, he stopped to offer burnt-offerings and peace-offerings; and then he felt in his soul, that God had accepted this service, and would crown it with good success^c.

Now, to enter into David's feelings aright, we must mark the contrast between this present effort and that which had so lately failed: and we must remember, that, not content with expressing his gratitude to God by secret aspirations, he strove, by his open and visible acknowledgments, to inspire all his people with the same ardent gratitude with which his own breast was filled. This will account for what might otherwise appear extravagant in this outward demonstration of his joy.]

2. By his anticipations of the future—

[The ark was the symbol of the divine presence: and by having it at Jerusalem, he hoped that he should have more

^c 1 Chron. xv. 1—3, 11—15.

easy access to Jehovah at all seasons, and bring down, both on himself and all his people, a rich abundance of spiritual blessings. Of this, David himself informs us in the 132d Psalm, which he wrote on that express occasion. He tells us, that he had sworn he would not come up into the tabernacle of his own house, nor go up into his bed, till he should have found out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob. He then adds, "Lo, we heard of it at Ephratah, (Kirjath-jearim,) and found it in the fields of the wood: and we will go into his tabernacle, and worship at his footstool." Then, declaring what his prayers to God should be, he anticipates the future advent of the Messiah, and states the answers he should receive to his prayers, repeating the very words of *his petitions* as the precise terms of *God's promises*: "The Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provision; I will satisfy her poor with bread: I will also clothe her priests with salvation; and her saints shall shout aloud for joy. There will I make the horn of David to bud: I have ordained a lamp for mine anointed. His enemies will I clothe with shame: but upon himself shall his crown flourish^d." After such prospects as these, can we wonder at any expressions of his joy, however ardent, or however extraordinary? Methinks, his zeal in this instance was temperance, and his excess sobriety.]

And now let me shew,

II. What occasion we also have for joy at this time—

This whole matter was typical of our blessed Lord's ascension into heaven. In the 68th Psalm, written by David on this occasion, he says, "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place. Thou hast ascended up on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men, yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them^e." And St. Paul quotes these very words as declarative of our Lord's ascension to heaven, and the out-pouring of the Spirit upon his Church as the very bestowment of those gifts which he had obtained for her^f.

^d Ps. cxxxii. 1—7, 13—18.

^e Ps. lxxviii. 17, 18.

^f Eph. iv. 8—12.

Here, then, we have already marked for us the nobler grounds of joy which we possess at this time,

1. In the dignity of the person so exalted—

[The ark was dignified as a *shadow*, and an *emblem*, of the Lord Jesus: but we commemorate the exaltation of *the Lord Jesus himself*. And I wish you particularly to notice how this also was announced by the holy Psalmist: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates, even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory^g.”]

2. In the richness of the benefits imparted by him—

[In the passage before mentioned we see, in a general view, the gifts which our ascended Saviour bestows upon his rebellious subjects. But who can recount them all, or even estimate so much as one of them aright? See the first-fruits of those benefits on the day of Pentecost; and behold them spread over the face of the whole earth, and poured out in the richest possible abundance at this day. See the Saviour “seated at the right hand of God, far above all principalities and powers, and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come. See how God hath put all things under his feet, and given him to be head over all things to the Church, which is his body, the fulness of him who filleth all in all^h.” See him “exalted thus, and having a name given him above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father*ⁱ.” All these his victories must be contemplated, and all the felicity of his redeemed people both in time and eternity, before we can estimate, in any measure, what ground we have for joy in the resurrection and ascension of our blessed Lord. My dear Brethren, only view these things by faith as David did, and even your lowest notes will resemble those of “that sweet singer of Israel:” “God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of the trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises unto our King, sing praises: for God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding^k.”]

^g Ps. xxiv. 7—10.

^h Eph. i. 20—23.

ⁱ Phil. ii. 9—11.

^k Ps. xlvii. 5—7.

But it will be profitable to inquire,

III. How far the expressions of our joy should correspond with his—

In point of ardour, we should not fall short of him, but should, if possible, exceed him. Yet in the mode of expressing our joy, I think he is not a proper pattern for us—

1. There is a great difference between his dispensation and ours—

[The Jewish dispensation abounded with “carnal ordinances:” and every service of the saints was marked with outward and visible signs. Every penitent that would obtain mercy of the Lord must carry his appointed offering, and conform in every thing to some peculiar law. The same must be done by those who would return thanks to God for mercies received. But *we*, under the Christian dispensation, are to enter into our chamber, and shut our door, that we may not be seen of men, but be seen by Him only whom we serve, the heart-searching God¹. The Jews needed the priests to mediate between God and them: but we may approach God, every one of us for ourselves, through that One Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ; yea, and may enter into the holy of holies itself, through the blood of his sacrifice which he once offered for us on the cross^m. This, then, marks a broad line of distinction between David’s services and ours, and renders such “*bodily exercise*” as his unsuitable to us.]

2. Our frame of mind should be more spiritual and more refined—

[I will not say that the body is not to participate in the emotions of our minds: for in this our fallen state such a sympathy must of necessity be called forth by any intense feeling, whether of joy or sorrow. But there is a delicacy and refinement in the Christian’s feelings: and the less they savour of what is *animal*, the better. A Christian’s joy is “the joy of the Holy Ghost:” and when it rises to the highest pitch, so as to be utterly “unspeakable,” it is then a “*glorified* joy,” such as the glorified saints and angels experience in heavenⁿ. Behold all of them before the throne of God: they are all prostrate on their faces, whilst yet they sing praises to God and to the Lamb. Their joy is a meek and holy joy: and sure I am that such is the joy that becomes us in this lower world, compassed as we are with so many infirmities. And I would the rather

¹ Matt. vi. 6.

^m Heb. x. 19—22.

ⁿ 1 Pet. i. 8. The Greek.

recommend that, because it will be less likely to cast a stumbling-block before us, and less likely to deceive your own souls. I am far from justifying Michal for casting such severe reflections on David. But her spirit shews what feelings will be generated in the bosoms of the ungodly, by any thing which seems to border on excess. By an inattention to the feelings of others, we may do considerable injury both to ourselves and them also. Our Lord, therefore, cautions us "not to cast our pearls before swine, lest they turn again and rend us." On such occasions, I think, we should rather put a veil over our faces, as Moses did, than blind them by a splendour which they cannot bear. Yet we are not so to regard the ungodly, as to be deterred from serving God in any, and in every, way that he requires. But if we bear in mind the infirmities of others, we may the better hope to allure them to the service of their God, and to bring them to a participation of all the blessings which we ourselves enjoy.]

CCCXIII.

DAVID DANCING BEFORE THE LORD.

2 Sam. vi. 22. *I will yet be more vile than thus, and will be base in mine own sight.*

A MEASURE of firmness is necessary in the whole of our intercourse with mankind, to prevent us from being drawn aside from the path of wisdom into a compliance with the prejudices and passions of those around us. But in all that pertains to religion it is more especially necessary; because in opposition to true piety the current is exceeding strong; and we must inevitably be borne away by it, if we do not cleave unto our God with full purpose of heart. The great and powerful may be supposed to be more free than others from the influence of public opinion: but their very elevation exposes them to storms and tempests more than others; and they have therefore the more need of firmness, to bear up against the taunts with which they will be assailed, in proportion as their zeal for God is ardent and conspicuous. David was a mighty monarch: yet not even he could serve God according to his conscience without exciting the contempt and indignation of one most nearly related to him. But

from the words which we have just read, we see how manfully he withstood the temptation. Let us notice,

I. The trial he met with—

This was very severe—

[He was bringing up the ark to Mount Zion; and had good reason to believe, that the service he was performing was pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God. Hence his soul overflowed with joy; and in the fulness of his heart “he danced before the Lord with all his might^a.” “As the ark came into the city, Michal, Saul’s daughter, looking through a window, saw him leaping and dancing before the Lord, and despised him in her heart^b.” Unconscious of the impression he had made on her mind, he went home to bless both her and all his house: but instead of finding the reception which he had expected as suited to the occasion, he was greeted with reproaches more keen and scandalous than one should have supposed it possible for the most ingenious malice to invent: “How glorious was the king of Israel to-day, who uncovered himself to-day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself^c!” How must he be thunder-struck, if I may so say, with such a salutation as this! To hear such a construction put upon his conduct! to be accused of an act which no one that was not lost to all sense of decency would commit even in private, and much less in the presence of thousands! to be accused of committing this too under the guise of religious zeal! and to hear this accusation from the lips of his own wife, and in language too as acrimonious and insulting as hell itself could inspire! and all this at a moment when his soul, inflamed only with love to God, was rapt into the third heavens! how inconceivably painful must this have been! Methinks, the cursings of Shimei were nothing in comparison of this.]

Yet do we see in this what all who are zealous for their God must expect—

[Religious zeal is hated by the world, who will never fail to misconstrue it as proceeding from some hateful principle, and as forming a cloak for some hidden abomination. Pride, conceit, fanaticism, and hypocrisy, are usually considered as the springs of action to those who profess godliness, especially if they bear any conspicuous part in the service of their God: their very activity is made the ground of accusation against them. Thus it has been in every age. David “wept and

^a ver. 14.

^b ver. 16.

^c ver. 20.

chastened himself with fasting; and *that* was turned to his reproach^d." John Baptist came in an abstemious way; and the people said of him, "He has a devil." The Lord Jesus Christ came in a way more suited to the liberty of the gospel dispensation; and his enemies took occasion from that to revile him as a "gluttonous man, and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners^e." Thus it is also in the present day; and thus we must expect to find it: for "the servant cannot be above his Lord: if they have called the Master of the house Beelzebub, much more will they those of his household^f." Our blessed Lord has told us, that, "if the world hated him, they will hate us also^g:" that they will "speak all manner of evil against us falsely for his sake^h;" and that they will even think they render service to God by putting to death his most faithful servantsⁱ. Nor will any eminence in rank, or power, or talent, or wisdom, or piety, exempt us from this lot. If David could not escape it, neither can we: if Paul was said to be "beside himself^k," those who tread in his steps must not expect to be regarded as of a sound mind. Nor will this opprobrious treatment proceed only from avowed enemies: our nearest friends and relatives will often be foremost in the assault; and "our bitterest foes be those of our own household^l."]

Having seen somewhat of David's trial, let us consider,

II. The determination he formed in consequence of it—

Neither abashed nor irritated, he calmly avowed his unalterable determination,

1. To serve his God without fear—

[If to bear this open testimony for his God, and to glorify him thus in the sight of all Israel, was to render himself vile, "he would be more and more vile" as long as he lived. A noble resolution this, and worthy to be adopted by every child of man! Are the servants of Satan bold, and shall Jehovah's servants be cowards? Shall the ungodly commit all manner of iniquity without shame, and the godly be ashamed of walking in the ways of righteousness? No: there should be a holy energy in the soul of every saint, a readiness to rise to the occasion, however formidable that occasion be: he should have within him the elasticity of a strong well-tempered spring, whose reaction is always augmented by the pressure.

^d Ps. lxi. 10, 11.

^e Luke vii. 33, 34.

^f Matt. x. 24, 25.

^g John xv. 18.

^h Matt. v. 11.

ⁱ John xvi. 2.

^k Acts xxvi. 24.

^l Matt. x. 36.

If religion be decried through the whole land, so that not a second family could be found in all Israel to adhere to God, we should say with Joshua, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord^m." Reproach for Christ's sake should be regarded as honourⁿ, and, though not coveted, yet be welcomed as the truest riches^o. It should be considered as a precious gift of God for Christ's sake^p, and be gloried in as a participation of Christ's sufferings, and a means of advancing his glory^q. We should be cautious indeed not by extravagance or misconduct of any kind to *merit* reproach: but, if it come for righteousness' sake, we should rejoice in it, and glorify God for it^r, "taking pleasure in it^s" as a testimony in our favour^t, and a pledge^u of an accumulated^x and everlasting weight of glory^y. Nor is it against reproach only that we should stand, but against the most envenomed persecution that men or devils can raise against us. We should be moved by no menaces, however cruel; but be ready to lay down our lives for Christ's sake^z, and account martyrdom a ground, not of pity and condolence, but of congratulation and joy^a.]

2. To abase himself without shame—

[The chief reason of Michal's rage was, that she thought David degraded himself by this public exhibition, which, however it might have become one of his inferior servants, was unsuited to his dignity. But David felt that a monarch in the sight of God is no more than other men; and that any elevation of rank which he possessed above others was rather a call to honour God the more, and not a reason for withholding from God any expression of gratitude and love. Hence he determined to regard himself as on a level with the least and meanest of his subjects in every thing that had respect to God. Nor would he value himself on this as an act of condescension, and thus convert humility into pride; but he would really be in his own estimation, what he professed before others to be, "less than the least of all saints^b," unworthy to "be a door-keeper in the house of his God^c," or to unloose the latchet of his Master's shoes^d.

And this is the frame of mind which we also should cultivate. So far from regarding earthly distinctions as a reason for rendering to God a more measured service, as though the highest acts of piety were fitted only for the vulgar, we should

^m Josh. xxiv. 15.

^p Phil. i. 29.

^s 2 Cor. xii. 10.

^x 2 Cor. iv. 17.

^a Phil. ii. 17, 18.

^d John i. 27.

ⁿ Acts v. 41.

^q 1 Pet. iv. 12—14.

^t Luke xxi. 13.

^y Rom. viii. 17.

^b Eph. iii. 8.

^o Heb. xi. 26.

^r 1 Pet. iv. 15, 16.

^u 2 Tim. ii. 12.

^z Acts xx. 24.

^c Ps. lxxxiv. 10.

consider wealth, honour, learning, and influence of every kind, as talents committed to us for the purpose of honouring God with them, and of rendering our example more effectual for the good of others. And, whilst the world is reproaching us for the *excess* of our piety, we should be ever abasing ourselves on account of its *defects*. If we keep in view the perfect requirements of God's law, and the unbounded obligations which he has laid us under by the gift of his only-begotten Son, how infinitely short of our duty will our best services appear! "Our very righteousnesses, in this view, will be as filthy rags^e," in which we can never hope to appear before God, and which can never come up with acceptance before him, till they have been washed in the Redeemer's blood^f. Thus, whether men admire or reproach us for our piety, we should equally abase ourselves, as in reality deserving neither their admiration nor their reproach, but rather their pity on account of the defectiveness of our services, and the smallness of our attainments.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who cast reproaches on the saints—

[Behold Michal and David on this occasion, and say, whether you would not rather be the persecuted saint, than the malignant persecutor? Is there a creature in the world who must not acknowledge the superiority of David's state, in the midst of all the ignominy that was cast upon him? Such then is the state of God's people in the midst of all the calumnies with which they are loaded, and such is the light in which their calumniators are regarded by Almighty God. In the instance before us, God marked his displeasure against Michal, by inflicting the curse of barrenness upon her to her dying hour^g. And us also he warns in the most solemn manner to avoid the rock on which she split: "Be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strong^h." If we choose not to serve God ourselves, let us beware how by scoffing and ridicule we discourage others: for our Lord tells us, that "it were better for us that a millstone were hanged about our neck, and we were cast into the depths of the sea, than that we should offend one of his little onesⁱ." To perish under the guilt of our own sins will be terrible enough: but to have "the blood of others also required at our hands" will be an inconceivable augmentation of our guilt and misery. This then would I entreat of all who despise and persecute the followers of Christ. Look into the Scriptures: see whether you approve of Cain, of Ishmael, of Michal, of Festus, or of any who bear the stamp and character

^e Isai. lxiv. 6.

^f Rev. vii. 14.

^g ver. 23.

^h Isai. xxviii. 22.

ⁱ Matt. xviii. 6.

of revilers in the Sacred Records: see whether in your consciences you do not rather side with Abel, and Isaac, and David, and Paul, and all the other sufferers, "of whom the world itself was not worthy^k?" And if your own consciences bear testimony to the saints, dare not to walk in the steps of their oppressors, persecuting the living saints, whilst you raise memorials to the dead^l.]

2. Those who are called to sustain them—

[Think it not strange that reproach is cast upon you for righteousness' sake; for thus it has been from the beginning: "They who have been born only of the flesh ever have persecuted those who are born after the Spirit," and so they will continue to do even to the end. You may, if you please, avoid persecution: "if you will be of the world, the world will love its own." But are you prepared to sacrifice all your hopes and prospects in the eternal world? St. James says, that "the friendship of the world is enmity with God; and that they who will be the friends of the world, must be the enemies of God:" say then, Are ye in doubt which of the alternatives to choose? What good can the world do you by its friendship, or what evil can it inflict by its enmity? To kill the body is the worst that they can do. But what will not God do for his faithful servants? and what will he not inflict on those who turn back from him? Can you think of being denied by Christ before the assembled universe, and not tremble^m? O consider this, and you will not hesitate a moment whom to serve; but will "choose that good part which shall never be taken away from you." You will gladly "suffer affliction with the people of God, and esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of the whole world."]

^k Heb. xi. 38. ^l Matt. xxiii. 29—31. ^m Matt. x. 32, 33.

CCCXIV.

DAVID'S GRATITUDE.

2 Sam. vii. 18, 19. *Then went king David in, and sat before the Lord, and he said, Who am I, O Lord God? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto? And this was yet a small thing in thy sight, O Lord God; but thou hast spoken also of thy servant's house, for a great while to come. And is this the manner of man, O Lord God?*

IT is no small comfort to reflect that the dispositions of our hearts are noticed by God, and, if good, are well-pleasing in his sight. There are many holy

desires and purposes which we are not able to accomplish; which yet are accepted before God, as much as if they had been carried into effect. David had conceived a wish and determination to build a house for God, in order that the ark, which was the symbol of the divine presence, might no more dwell within curtains, while he himself was dwelling in a house of cedar. But God did not suffer him to execute his purpose, on account of his having shed much blood in war^a: nevertheless he commended the desire ("thou didst well that it was in thy heart^b") and made it an occasion of discovering to him the honour that was to be conferred on him and his posterity. Struck with the majesty and condescension of God, David went in before him, and burst forth into these expressions of devoutest adoration. We shall shew,

I. What grounds David had for gratitude and thanksgiving—

Though David was not suffered to gratify his own inclinations in the particular before mentioned, yet he found abundant cause of thankfulness in,

1. The mercies already vouchsafed to him—

[He had been taken from a very low employment^c; chosen in preference, not only to all his own family, but also to the whole nation; preserved in the midst of numberless dangers; exalted in due season to the throne prepared for him; made victorious over all his enemies; and brought to a state of unrivalled power, affluence, and prosperity^d. On a review of these mercies, he could not but be astonished at the divine goodness to him, or refrain from proclaiming it with rapturous admiration.]

2. The mercies yet further promised to him—

[God had promised that he should have a son, on whom the honour of building a temple should be conferred; yea, moreover, that the Messiah also should spring from his loins, and sit upon his throne for ever and ever^e. In comparison of this, David observes that all his personal advancement was "but a light matter:" and then, as utterly at a loss to express

^a 1 Chron. xxii. 8.

^d ver. 9.

^b 1 Kings viii. 18.

^e ver. 12—14. with Heb. i. 5.

^c ver. 8.

his sense of the divine goodness, he exclaims, "Is this the manner of man, O Lord God?" is this the way in which mean and worthless men, such as he felt himself to be, are treated by their fellow-creatures^f? No: it is peculiar to God, who magnifies his own sovereignty in conferring the richest benefits on the most unworthy of mankind.]

But however distinguished a favourite of Heaven David was,

II. We have still greater reason for gratitude and thanksgiving—

Let us view our obligations to God,

1. Generally—

[*As creatures*, we were originally formed of the dust of the earth: yet, though so mean in our original, we were distinguished above the whole creation by having a rational and immortal soul breathed into us, and a capacity given us to know, to love, to serve, and to enjoy God. Let any one of the human race reflect on this, and say, whether he has not reason to adore the goodness of God, who has given him powers so infinitely superior to any that are possessed by the brute creation, and faculties that shall enjoy eternal blessedness, if it be not utterly his own fault. Let but this elevation of our nature be considered, and we shall exclaim, with profoundest reverence, "Who am I, O Lord God, that thou hast brought me hitherto?"

As sinners, we have still further ground for praise. We are by nature *mean*; but by practice we have been inexpressibly *vile*. Yet when we were deserving of nothing but his wrath, God loved us, and gave his own Son to die for us. Further, when we were even trampling on the blood that was shed for us, he sent his Spirit to reveal his Son in our hearts, and both to fit us for his glory, and to bring us safely to the possession of it. And "is this the manner of man, O Lord God?" Man selects those who are great and worthy, in order to bestow on them his richest favours; but God, in choosing us, "has lifted the beggar from the dunghill, to set him among princes, and to make him inherit a throne of glory^g." O what marvellous condescension is this! and what gratitude does it demand at our hands! "Who is a God like unto thee^h?"]

2. Particularly, as compared with David—

[In no respect are the obligations here specified to be put in competition with those vouchsafed to us. Was he chosen from the low estate of a shepherd? Look at the state from which God has chosen us. We were fallen, guilty, hell-

^f See 1 Chron. xvii. 17. ^g 1 Sam. ii. 8. ^h Exod. xv. 11.

deserving creatures, utterly incapable of ever restoring ourselves to his favour; yet did God set his love upon us, and elevate us, not to an earthly throne, but to a crown and kingdom in heaven itself. And not from earthly enemies, such as David had to encounter, has he preserved us, but from all the powers of darkness, against whose wiles and devices it was not possible for us to stand, if we had not been upheld by his almighty power and grace. And though it must be confessed, that to be the progenitor of the Messiah was an inconceivably high honour, yet to be interested in him, and united to him as members of his mystical body, and made fellow-heirs with him of all the glory and felicity of heaven, is an infinitely higher honour. And all this is vouchsafed to *us*, so that in all the points which David enumerates, we are far above him: *our election* is from a far more degraded state; *our elevation* is to a far higher throne; *our preservation* is from far greater dangers, and more powerful enemies; and *our destiny*, to an infinitely higher honour than any which a carnal relation to Christ could confer. How well then may we exclaim, What are *we*, that we should ever be brought to such a state as this?]

That this subject may be brought home more powerfully to our hearts and consciences, let us comprehend it under two pertinent REFLECTIONS :

1. How wonderful has been God's love to us !

[Well may we say with David, "Is this the manner of man, O Lord God?" No: nothing like it ever did, or could, exist among men. Man selects *the most worthy* as the objects of his love: but God has chosen *the most unworthy*, even us, who had reduced ourselves to the condition of the fallen angels, and deserved nothing but their portion at his hands. Man confers but *small benefits*, which, however valued by his fellows, scarcely deserve a thought: but God confers *riches and honours which far exceed all human comprehension*. Man *soon repents* of the favours he has conferred, when those on whom he has bestowed them prove themselves unworthy of them. But "*the gifts and calling of God are without repentance*" on his partⁱ: yea, "if it had not been that He was unchangeable, not a soul amongst us could ever have been saved^k." Further, what man bestows is but *for a little time*: the present short life is the only season wherein we can possess any benefits conferred by man. But what God bestows, he gives *for ever and ever*: and death, so far from terminating our felicity, brings us into the most complete and everlasting enjoyment of it.

ⁱ Rom. xi. 29.

^k Mal. iii. 6.

“ Behold then, what manner of love is this wherewith the Father hath loved us!” Verily, if David was quite overwhelmed with the favours conferred on him, much more may we, whose obligations are so infinitely higher, and more permanent than his.]

2. How faint and cold is our love to him!

[See David coming into the presence of his God, and sitting in the temple before him. His mind is quite oppressed with a sense of gratitude, and words seem altogether inadequate to express his feelings. Yet, notwithstanding our obligations to God so infinitely exceed his, how rarely has God ever seen us in the posture of David! Many of us, it is to be feared, have never spent so much as one hour in our whole lives, in his contemplations, and in his exercises — — —

Do you ask, How shall I attain his frame? Beg of God to work it in you by his good Spirit. And especially do as he did. He determined to promote to the very utmost of his power the honour and glory of his heavenly Benefactor: and THEN *it was that God revealed to him all the purposes of his grace* respecting the raising up of a son from his loins to execute the work which he had contemplated, and to make that son of his the progenitor of the Messiah himself. Improve ye in like manner for God all the faculties and powers that ye possess; and in honouring God ye yourselves shall be honoured. Only exert yourselves for God, and every thing which you do, or only devise, for him, shall return in blessings into your own bosom.]

CCCXV.

THE PROMISES AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO PRAYER.

2 Sam. vii. 27. *Thou, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, hast revealed to thy servant, saying, I will build thee an house: therefore hath thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto thee.*

IF we were to judge from the infinite distance which exists between the Creator and his creatures, and especially between a holy God and sinful man, we should say, it was vain, if not impious, to imagine that any request of ours could enter into the ears of Jehovah, or that he could by any means be induced to notice it with his favourable regards. Indeed, if God had not, of his own sovereign mercy, commanded us to spread our wants before him, and assured us of

an answer to our supplications, Beelzebub himself might as well hope for acceptance in prayer, as we. But “God has given us exceeding great and precious promises;” which we may plead with him, just as David pleaded in the passage before us.

David had desired to build an house for the Lord: and Nathan, the prophet, had encouraged him in his purpose. But God, not willing that David, who had shed so much blood, should execute that office, devolved it upon one who should spring from his loins^a; at the same time assuring David, that God would make his family to be of long continuance upon his throne: “The Lord telleth thee, that he will make *thee* an house^b.” Encouraged by this promise, David poured out his soul before God in prayer, saying, “Now, O Lord God, *the word that thou hast spoken* concerning thy servant, and concerning his house, establish it for ever, and *do as thou hast said*.” Then, apologizing, if I may so speak, for presuming to offer such a prayer, he refers expressly to the promise before specified, and *assigns that as the ground* on which he had found it in his heart to pray this prayer^d. Then he goes on, again and again reverting to this in vindication of himself: “And now, O Lord God, thou art that God, and *thy words be true*, and *thou hast promised* this goodness unto thy servant. *Therefore*, now let it please thee to *bless the house of thy servant*, that it may continue for ever before thee: for thou, O Lord God, *hast spoken it*: and with thy blessing let *the house of thy servant be blessed for ever*.”

Now, in speaking upon this subject, I will shew,

- I. The connexion which exists between the promises of God and our prayers—

The promises of God are, in fact,

1. Our warrant for asking—

[Pardon, peace, holiness, glory! How should it be, that we, sinful creatures, should dare to ask such blessings at God's hands? But God has promised them all. There is not any

^a ver. 12, 13.

^b ver. 11.

^c ver. 25.

^d The text.

^e ver. 28, 29.

one thing that an immortal soul can need, which is not the subject of an express promise in the word of God — — — Moreover, he permits his sinful creatures to come to him “as his remembrancers.” By this very name are his suppliant people designated^f; and every one of them is authorized to spread his promises before him, saying, “Remember thy word unto thy servant, wherein thou hast caused me to hope^g,” and “do unto me as thou hast said^h” — — —]

2. Our security for receiving—

[God is altogether immutable, both in his natureⁱ, and in his word^k — — — “Sooner should heaven and earth pass away, than one jot or tittle of his word should fail^l.” As for difficulties, we have nothing to do with them. Sarah sinned in suffering these to have the least influence upon her mind: for “Is any thing too hard for the Lord^m?” Our confidence cannot possibly be too strong, when we have an express promise to rely upon. We should have this as an abiding principle within us; as a principle which no difficulties whatever should shake: “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it goodⁿ?” Never did any one trust in the Lord, and find himself disappointed of his hope. As Joshua appealed to all Israel, so may we appeal to every believer in the universe: “Ye know, in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you: all are come to pass unto you; and not one thing hath failed thereof.”]

From the example of David I will further point out,

II. Our duty in relation to them—

1. We must embrace them as made over to us in Christ Jesus—

[It is “in Christ alone that they are all Yea, and Amen^p,” and it is to those only who are in Christ by a living faith, that any of them are made. True, indeed, there are general promises given to those who come to Christ^q: but we never have any part in them, till we actually perform the conditions on which alone they are vouchsafed. The Covenant of grace provides for us all that we can ever stand in need of. But

^f Isai. lxii. 6, 7. See the marginal version.

^h ver. 11, 16. ⁱ Mal. iii. 6. Jam. i. 17.

^l Matt. xxiv. 35. ^m Gen. xviii. 10—14.

^o Josh. xxiii. 14.

^q Matt. xi. 28. John vi. 37.

^g Ps. cxix. 49.

^k Heb. vi. 17.

ⁿ Numb. xxiii. 19.

^p 2 Cor. i. 20.

we must “lay hold on that covenant,” and on “Jesus the Mediator of that covenant,” before we can possess the blessings of it. Let not this be forgotten. Let us not suppose that we are to obtain mercy in ways of our own devising. We must come to God by Christ: we must plead what Christ has done and suffered for us: we must trust in him alone. There is “no access to God, for any of us, but by Him^r.” “nor is there any name but His, whereby any man can be saved^s.”]

2. We must treasure them up in our minds, in order to plead them before God—

[In going to God, we greatly honour him, when we remind him of his promises, and declare our entire dependence on them. See the example of Jacob, who for his power in prayer was surnamed Israel^t. He had been assured, in a dream, that God would be with him in all places, and never leave him till he had fulfilled to him his promises in their fullest extent^u. Full twenty years afterwards, Jacob, in a season of great distress, reminded God of this promise, saying, “O God of my father Abraham, and God of my Father Isaac, *the Lord which saidst unto me*, Return unto thy country and to thy kindred, and *I will deal well with thee*: deliver me, I pray thee! for THOU SAIDST, I will surely do thee good^x.” Thus we should bear in mind the promises which God has given us, and present before him those which are in a more peculiar manner suited to our state. This will give us confidence before God; and it will secure to us infallibly an answer of peace: for “this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: and, if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him^y.”]

3. We must wait with patience for the fulfilment of them—

[God may not answer, either at the time, or in the manner, that our impatient spirits may wish. But though we may *ask* of him, we are not to *dictate* to him. We must wait His time, and leave every thing to His disposal. The saints of old “saw the promises afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them^z.” Thus must we do. Times and seasons must be left to God, who alone knoweth what will be eventually best for us. If we “have *found it in our hearts to pray unto*

^r John xiv. 6. Eph. ii. 18.

^t Gen. xxxii. 24—28.

^x Gen. xxxii. 9, 11, 12.

^z Heb. xi. 13.

^s Acts iv. 12.

^u Gen. xxviii. 15.

^y 1 John v. 14, 15.

him," we may be sure of two things: first, that God himself has put it into our hearts to pray; and next, that he *therefore* put it into our hearts to pray, because it was previously in his heart to give. It is "through faith and patience that we are to inherit the promises^a:" and the more dark his dispensations, whether of providence or of grace, may be, the more must we "hold fast our confidence in him," saying, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him^b."]

^a Heb. vi. 12.

^b Job xiii. 15.

CCCXVI.

NATHAN'S PARABLE.

2 Sam. xii. 1—7. *And the Lord sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him. And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die: and he shall restore the lamb four-fold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.*

GOD, in the disposal of his gifts, does not conduct himself by any such laws as are necessary for the regulation of human actions. He is a Sovereign who may deal with his creatures as he pleases, without "giving account to us of any of his matters." Accordingly we find that sometimes he has exercised a severity beyond what we, with our limited apprehensions, might have expected: and at other times he has shewn mercy, where we could have expected nothing but the heaviest judgments. We have lately seen him striking Uzzah dead for a well-meant error, and taking the kingdom from Saul for not waiting quite so long for Samuel as he should have done:

but in our text we behold him sending a prophet unto David to bring him to repentance, after the commission of such crimes as cannot be contemplated without horror and amazement. But “His ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts.”

The conduct of David as portrayed in our text, together with the means used by Nathan to humble him for it, lead us to shew,

I. To what an awful extent a man’s conscience may be seared—

We read of persons whose “consciences are seared as with an hot iron^a,” and such was now the state of David—

[One would have supposed that, after the commission of adultery with Bathsheba, he would have been scarcely able to endure his existence through the agonies of his mind: but he was only concerned about concealing it from man: accordingly, on finding that her pregnancy must of necessity lead to a discovery of the crime, he adopted various means to deceive Uriah; and when he did not succeed in them, he sent an order to Joab to expose, and to desert, him in battle, so as to ensure his death by the hands of the enemy. Would one not suppose that such complicated crimes as these should awaken him? Yet behold for nine or ten months he was, as far as appears to us, altogether insensible of his guilt.

At the same time he was quick-sighted enough to the crimes of others, and severe in the extreme against the man, whom Nathan represented as oppressively taking the favourite lamb of a poor neighbour in preference to one out of his own flock: he deemed that man to be worthy of death, because he had shewn no pity; and adjudged him to pay four-fold for the injury he had committed.

Who can reflect on this without utter astonishment? That so holy a man as David, who had been so honoured of the Lord, and had done so much for the honour of his God, should be left to fall in so grievous a manner, and to lie for so long a time impenitent in his sins! Who can look upon it, and not weep for him? Who can look upon it, and not tremble for himself?]

But awful as this state of mind appears, it is, alas! too common in this world—

[Such enormous crimes indeed as those of David are not common: but who has not committed some evils which ought

^a 1 Tim. iv. 2.

to have humbled him in the dust before God? — — — yet who has not continued months, and even years, without ever abasing himself with humiliation and contrition? Who has not shewn a strange insensibility with respect to the guilt he has contracted? — — — We can easily discern the faults of others, and can censure them with severity; but towards our own we are most blind and most indulgent.

Nor must we be considered here as referring altogether to those who despise religion: it is a common evil: it is found even in the house of God: there are professors of religion who are as blind to their own sins, as if they never had known what sin was; and who, if their misdeeds are unknown to man, continue for years unhumbled in the sight of God. Yes; there are too many, who are both blinded and "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin;" and, if ever God should give them true repentance, they will be as much astonished at their present insensibility, as now they are at that which is recorded in our text.]

Seeing then how callous a man's conscience may become, let us inquire,

II. In what way it may be most successfully excited to perform its office—

Much may be learned from the conduct of Nathan on this occasion :

1. We should endeavour to divest men of the self-love that blinds them—

[This was well contrived in the parable that Nathan spake. David did not see the drift of the parable as relating to himself, and therefore felt no personal interest in his decision. Hence his judgment was free, and his determination of the cause unbiassed. Had he been aware that he was about to condemn himself, he would have been far more indulgent towards the offending person.

Now this mode of convicting persons, who would have revolted at any plainer dealing, has been frequently practised with good effect. It was to such an expedient that Joab resorted, in order to prevail on David to recall his son Absalom from banishment^b — — — and by a similar device a prophet constrained Ahab to condemn himself for sparing Benhadad, whom God had delivered into his hands to be destroyed^c — — — Our Lord himself also frequently adopted the same method of counteracting the prejudices of the Scribes and Pharisees^d — — —

^b 2 Sam. xiv. 5—11, 20.

^c 1 Kings xx. 35—42.

^d Matt. xxi. 40—45.

By such means a person is silenced at once, and is “condemned out of his own mouth.” True indeed, in cases where the mind is open to conviction, these precautions are less necessary; but the sentence that is founded on such grounds is always less offensive, because the criminal passes it upon himself.]

2. We should however combine fidelity with address—

[Sooner or later we must come to the point, “Thou art the man.” We are to consider ourselves as messengers of the Most High God, who has said, “He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat^e?” We must not fear the face of man: our concern for his welfare must swallow up all dread of his displeasure; and the consideration of the account which we must one day give to God, must impel us, even at the peril of our lives, to bear a faithful testimony in his service. Behold the boldness of Elijah in reproving Ahab^f; and of John in condemning the incestuous commerce of Herod^g: these are the examples which we must follow, when milder methods have proved ineffectual: but our object must always be, not merely to acquit ourselves to God as faithful monitors, but to win the souls of those whom we admonish. The recollection of our own weakness, and proneness to fall, must ever render us as tender as possible towards our fallen brother: “we must restore him in the spirit of meekness; considering ourselves, lest we also be tempted^h.”]

Let us then, in the view of this history, LEARN,

1. To tremble for ourselves—

[Did David fall? Who then is safe? Did David sink into such an obdurate state? Who has not reason to dread lest he be given over to a reprobate mind? Clear enough it is from whence repentance must proceed, whether in its first commencement, or in its further progress: if God work it not in us by his Holy Spirit, we shall be altogether as insensible as a rock of adamant. Let none of us then indulge a proud security, or imagine ourselves out of the reach of temptation; “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” — — —]

2. To rejoice in God—

[O what mercy did God display on this occasion; that instead of cutting off the royal miscreant by some signal judgment, he sent a prophet to awaken his drowsy conscience, and bring him to repentance! We lament indeed, that many have taken occasion from David’s fall to make light of sin; and from his

^e Jer. xxiii. 28.

^g Matt. xiv. 4.

^f 1 Kings xviii. 17, 18. and xxi. 19—21.

^h Gal. vi. 1.

recovery, to imagine, that God will never execute his threatened judgments : but we have reason to bless our God that such a monument of mercy has been exhibited in the Scriptures. How many thousands of backsliding Christians have been restored by means of this one example ! We are now encouraged to say to all, however heinous their iniquities have been, "Return, ye backsliding children ; and God will heal your backslidings, and love you freely." "Only acknowledge your iniquity," and then "it shall not be your ruin." Is there any one amongst us who has become hardened in his sins ? O, hear what God says to his people of oldⁱ ; and seek "repentance unto life," even that "repentance which is not to be repented of."]

ⁱ Isai. lvii. 17, 18.

CCCXVII.

DAVID'S HUMILIATION AND ACCEPTANCE.

2 Sam. xii. 13. *And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin ; thou shalt not die.*

IT is scarcely to be conceived to what a degree sin will blind the eyes, and harden the heart. We see indeed that the ungodly world will commit every species of iniquity without either shame or remorse : but who would imagine that a person enlightened, renewed, and sanctified by the Spirit of God, should in the space of a few days be reduced by sin to a state of utter obduracy ? Yet such was the change which one single temptation speedily effected on him who was "the man after God's own heart." The circumstances of David's crime are so well known, that they need not at present to be enlarged upon. But his long impenitence, his apparent forgetfulness of his horrid deeds, and his excessive severity against a man whose fault bore no proportion to his own, are less noticed ; though they cannot fail to strike every one who reads the account of his conversation with Nathan. By an apposite and well-wrought parable, the Prophet Nathan had led David inadvertently to pass sentence against himself ; and then availed himself of the opportunity to

charge home upon him the crimes he had perpetrated. Then it was, and not till then, that David felt a just sense of his guilt: though nine months at least had elapsed since his criminal intercourse with Bathsheba, yet his conscience had slept, till it was now awakened to perform its office. On this occasion he confessed his sin to Nathan; and received from Nathan a consolatory assurance, that his iniquity, heinous as it was, was pardoned.

There are two points to which the text directs our attention;

I. David's humiliation—

There does not at first sight appear any thing worthy of notice in David's confession: but, if we examine it carefully, we shall find in it several things which indicated a deep and true repentance.

1. He acknowledged his sin as an offence against God—

[The evil of sin *in this view* is generally overlooked; and the quality of actions is appreciated and determined by their effects on society. Hence the offences which are committed solely against God, such as unbelief, impenitence, self-righteousness, and the like, are never condemned by the world, or even considered as blemishing the moral character at all; while such crimes as theft and perjury render a man universally execrated and abhorred. But it is from its relation to God that sin derives its principal malignity: its chief heinousness consists in its being a violation of God's law, a contempt of his authority, and a practical denial of all his attributes. If any sin whatever could deserve to be marked with superior infamy on other considerations, it would surely be the crimes which David had committed: yet, in adverting to these very actions, David passes over their criminality in relation to man, and notices them only as offences against God^a. This shews that he had just views of his conduct: and that the grounds of his humiliation were precisely such as the occasion required.]

2. He made no attempt to extenuate his guilt—

[Unhumbled persons uniformly endeavour to palliate their faults. Adam cast the blame of his transgression on Eve; and Eve transferred it to the serpent^b. Saul, when reproved for

^a See Ps. li. 4. Joseph's views of sin perfectly agreed with those of David. See Gen. xxxix. 9.

^b Gen. iii. 12, 13.

sparing Agag and the chief of the spoil, shifted the blame from himself upon the people; and, as far as it still attached to him, excused himself as acting involuntarily, and as overawed by the people^c. But David's mouth was shut: he uttered not one single word in extenuation of his crimes: heavy as Nathan's charge against him was, he fell under it. This was another excellent proof of his penitence and contrition: and it is certain, that wherever real humiliation is, the penitent will be more ready to aggravate his guilt, than to palliate and excuse it.]

3. He manifested no displeasure against his reprover—

[Men in general, and great men in particular, are very apt to take offence, when told of their faults. They think themselves at liberty to insult God as much as they please: but no one must take the liberty to maintain the cause of God in opposition to them. Some indeed have been found, in different ages, who have ventured to speak with faithfulness to monarchs: but they have always done it at the peril of their lives^d, and not unfrequently have paid the penalty of death for their presumption^e. But in the present instance no displeasure at all was manifested: on the contrary, we have reason to think that Nathan was more endeared to David than ever by his fidelity, since David afterwards called one of his own children by the prophet's name^f; and shewed confidence in him to the latest hour of his life^g. In this therefore we have a further evidence of the sincerity and depth of David's repentance.]

4. He was willing to take shame to himself even before men—

[There is nothing which men will not do in order to conceal their guilt from men: they will “add iniquity to iniquity,” and perpetrate murder itself, in order to avoid the shame to which their crimes have exposed them. How keenly was Saul affected by Samuel's refusal to honour him before the people! The dread of that public dishonour pained him more than all the denunciations of God's wrath^h. But the reproaches of men, however severe, were of no account in David's eyes: that which pained him was, that he had given occasion for those reproaches, and that God would be dishonoured by them: and

^c 1 Sam. xv. 15, 24.

^d See 1 Kings xiii. 4. and xxi. 20. and xxii. 8. and 2 Kings i. 9. and 2 Chron. xvi. 10.

^e 2 Chron. xxiv. 21. and xxv. 16. and Matt. xiv. 3—5, 10.

^f 2 Sam. v. 14.

^g 1 Kings i. 24, 27, 32—34.

^h 1 Sam. xv. 25—30.

therefore, though he thereby published and perpetuated his own shame, he wrote some of his penitential Psalms, and set them to music for the use of penitents in that and all succeeding ages. Being "vile in his own eyes," it was a matter of small concern to him that he was vile also in the eyes of others: he loathed and "abhorred himself," and therefore submitted readily to be abhorred by others.]

The truth of his repentance being manifest, we proceed to notice,

II. His acceptance consequent upon it—

Very remarkable was the answer of the prophet to the royal penitent. We remark from it that David's acceptance with God was,

1. Immediate—

[There was no interval of time between the confession of David and the reply of Nathan. The very instant that David repented, God forgave him. This is particularly noticed by David himself as a marvellous expression of God's love and mercy; "I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sinⁱ." We should have expected that God would suspend his forgiveness, till David should have evinced the truth of his repentance by a subsequent life of piety: but "God's ways and thoughts are not like ours; yea rather, they are as much above ours as the heavens are above the earth^k." God acts in a way worthy of himself. His grace is his own, to dispose of according to his sovereign will; and he dispenses it to whomsoever, and in whatever way, he sees fit. He shews, if we may so speak, peculiar pleasure in manifesting his compassion towards repenting sinners. He represents himself as falling on the neck of the returning prodigal, and as interrupting his confessions by testimonies of his parental love and pardoning grace. Towards the dying thief also our incarnate God displayed the same readiness to forgive, in that he not only complied with his petition, but far exceeded, without one moment's hesitation, his most enlarged desires^l.

Thus has he given us a practical comment on his own gracious declarations, and demonstrated, for our comfort, that he is "slow to anger and ready to forgive."]

2. Attested—

[Nathan spake, not as a man who suggested only a surmise or doubtful opinion, but as a prophet who was inspired to declare what God had really done. God willed not that his

ⁱ Ps. xxxii. 5.

^k Isai. lv. 8, 9.

^l Luke xxiii. 42, 43.

repenting servant should be kept in suspense; and therefore ordered Nathan to communicate to him the joyful tidings, not that God *would* put away his sin, but that he *had* put it away, and that the penal consequences of his transgression should never come upon his soul. It is thus that God frequently acts towards his people: as he made known to David by his prophet, so he reveals to them by his Spirit, that their iniquities are forgiven, and their sins covered^m. He desires not the constrained service of a slave, but the willing and grateful obedience of a child. "Though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his merciesⁿ;" and will cause his believing people to enjoy an assured sense of their acceptance with him^o.]

3. Complete—

[The sins which David had committed were from that very moment "blotted out as a morning cloud:" neither his adultery nor his murder, nor one particle of guilt of any kind, was imputed to him. There were indeed some temporal judgments entailed upon him: the fruit of his adulterous commerce was blasted, and the child stricken with death. David's own wives were all defiled publicly by his son Absalom: and the sword, according to Nathan's prediction, never departed from his house. These things however were merely temporal, and were designed as much for the benefit of others as for his correction: they tended to impress on all a sense of the malignity of David's crimes; and to shew that, however God might pity and forgive a sinner, he utterly and unchangeably abhorred sin. But, notwithstanding these *remembrancers* of his iniquity, his sin was "cast, as it were, into the very depths of the sea;" as ours also shall be, if we truly repent; nor will God ever remember them against us any more for ever^p.]

We may LEARN then from this subject,

1. The benefit of a judicious and faithful Ministry—

[The method which Nathan used in order to reach the conscience of David, was extremely judicious: and when he had succeeded in making a breach, then he commenced a direct attack, "Thou art the man." Had he been less cautious, he had probably shut the ears of his royal master; and had he been satisfied with offering some oblique hints, he had failed to impress his callous mind. But by a happy union of wisdom and fidelity, he gained his point^q. Well was it for David that he had such a prophet in his court; for, without *his* admonitions,

^m See Isai. vi. 7. and xxxviii. 17. Zech. iii. 4.

ⁿ Lam. iii. 32. ^o Isai. xii. 1. and Rom. viii. 15, 16.

^p Mic. vii. 18, 19. Heb. viii. 12. ^q Prov. xxv. 12.

he might probably have become more and more obdurate, till he had perished in his sin. Thus should all esteem themselves highly favoured of God, if they have a minister, who, while he fears not the faces of men, has a tender love for their souls. They should gladly listen to his admonitions, and thankfully receive his reproofs: they should make it a continual subject of their prayers, that his word may come with power to their souls, to awaken them to a sense of sin, and to bring them to the enjoyment of salvation.]

2. The boundless extent of God's mercy—

[Who would have conceived it possible that such sins as David's should be so soon forgiven? But, "as God's majesty is, so also is his mercy." "He delighteth in mercy;" and "waits that he may be gracious unto us." His message to us is, "Only acknowledge thy transgressions that thou hast sinned against the Lord thy God^r." And for our encouragement he declares, "If any say, I have sinned, and it profited me not; I will deliver him from going down into the pit, and his soul shall see the light^s." Let us then carry all our sins to him: whether they have been more or less heinous in the sight of men, let us not continue under the guilt of them, when they may be so speedily removed: let us remember, that, in and through Christ, God is reconciled to a guilty world; and that, while "they who cover their sins shall not prosper, whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall find mercy^t."]]

^r Jer. iii. 13.

^s Job xxxiii. 27, 28.

^t Prov. xxviii. 13.

CCCXVIII.

AMNON AND TAMAR.

2 Sam. xiii. 15. *Then Amnon hated her exceedingly; so that the hatred wherewith he hated her, was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her.*

THE word of God will surely take effect in due season; and every threatening in it, as well as every promise, will be accomplished. God had, with most astonishing mercy, so far pardoned the iniquity of David, as to remit all punishment of it in the future world: but, as his sin had produced a public scandal, and had caused the name of God to be blasphemed through the land, God warned him by Nathan, that he should be visited with troubles through life; with troubles in his own family, not unlike to those which

he himself had brought on the family of Uriah. Accordingly we find that these troubles speedily commenced. His eldest son Amnon, the heir to his throne, conceived a criminal desire after his half-sister, Tamar; and so violent was his passion, that his health was visibly impaired by it. By the advice of his friend Jonadab, he laid a plan for getting her within his reach; and then, when she would not consent to his impious purposes, he effected them by force. But no sooner had he accomplished his wishes, than his love was turned into a most inveterate hatred; insomuch that, as our text informs us, "the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her." Now this change of his mind gives us a deep insight into human nature; and affords us occasion for many profitable remarks upon,

I. The love of the ungodly—

As it is not our design to dwell more than is necessary on the particular event that is here recorded, we shall consider personal attachment as comprehending both love and friendship. Now love, in this extended sense, may exist in a very high degree where there is no religious principle; it may even in some respects vie with the most exalted instances that are to be found in the Church of God; with the love of Jacob to Rachel, for the sake of whom seven years of servitude appeared but as a few days^a; and with the friendship that subsisted between David and Jonathan, whose love for each other exceeded even the love of women^b. But it must be confessed, that far the greater part of that which passes for love and friendship in the world, is bad; and that even the best of it is very defective. For the elucidating of this point we shall shew,

1. The criminality of that which is evil—

[Behold that which is spoken of in our text: it was exceeding ardent, it is true; but it was *selfish, cruel, impious*: it had respect to nothing but personal gratification; it sought

^a Gen. xxix. 20.

^b 2 Sam. i. 25, 26.

that gratification at the expense of the honour, the interest, the happiness of the object beloved; and it trampled under foot every law whether human or divine. In the case before us this is plain and obvious; and it will be found that very much of that which is called love and friendship, is of precisely the same stamp and character. It is scarcely needful to advert to that which issues in the seduction of innocence, and a dereliction of the seduced object to all the horrors of infamy and want; yet, how many thousands, of the lower classes especially, have reason to deplore and execrate the existence of such love, amongst their family, their friends, or their acquaintance! Nor is the friendship of innumerable classes both in higher and lower life unlike to this. Behold the gamester; he has his friends to whom he is strongly attached, not for any valuable qualities in them, but because they administer to his pleasure: but so cruel is his attachment, that if he can win from them all that they possess, he will gladly do it, though he thereby reduce both them and their families to the lowest ebb of misery and ruin. In like manner the persons that unite for what is called conviviality and good fellowship: what are these, but confederates against the God of heaven and earth, associated together to encourage one another in a contempt of his majesty, and a violation of his laws? If men unite for the purposes of plunder, or in resistance to the constituted authorities of the land, we conceive that we do them no injustice, when we speak of them as thieves or rebels: nor will God designate by any gentler terms the union of those who uphold one another in a systematic opposition to his holy will. Whatever be the particular line of conduct they pursue, whether the more flagrant one of open licentiousness, or the more approved one of sober sensuality, their love is *selfish*, because it centres in self; it is *cruel*, because it seeks its own ends without regard to the happiness of others; and it is *impious*, because it is a conspiracy to banish God from the world.]

2. The deficiency of that which is good—

[Nothing is more honourable than virtuous love, nor any thing more delightful than friendship founded on virtuous principles. But still if the attachment be merely that which springs from natural affections, it is defective: it is defective in its *foundation*, its *exercise*, its *continuance*.

That cannot be perfect which has not piety for its *basis*. Our love to each other should spring from our love to God, and have respect to his image in the person beloved. The person's conformity to God's mind and will should be the reason, and the measure, of our love to him. Where this is not the case, the union will be in danger of being dissolved by that very thing which ought most powerfully to cement it. If

one of the parties become pious, the change will only produce alienation of heart in him whose attachment was founded on natural qualities or attainments: the correspondence of sentiment which is essential to love will have ceased; and the most ardent affection will from thenceforth either be changed into hatred, or subside into cold respect.

As the foundation of merely natural attachments is defective, so also is *the exercise*: for how can our love aim at the spiritual welfare of its object, when we ourselves have no spiritual sensibility? We may do much, and suffer much, for the temporal happiness of those we love; but we shall retard, rather than advance, whatever could conduce to the good of his soul. How miserably defective then must such attachment be, when, instead of promoting, it obstructs the most valuable ends of life!

Nor is it possible, in the very nature of things, for such attachments to *continue* beyond the present state of existence. The righteous have a prospect beyond the grave. As a river gliding sweetly through its banks is separated at last by an intervening pier, and then flows in renewed union to the ocean to part no more, so do the godly pass their days together in sweet communion, till separated for a moment by death, they meet again in the future world, to spend an eternity together in unfading bliss. But no such prospect opens to the worldly man: however happy he may be in his love or friendship, his views are bounded by the narrow limits of this present world. We might add too, that even in this world its continuance is most uncertain: for where religion does not reign in the heart, and form the basis of our affection, the attachment is liable to be easily interrupted, and speedily dissolved: and it is but too often found, that when the object ceases, through illness or poverty, to administer the wonted satisfaction, attachment languishes, and gives way to indifference and neglect.]

Intimately connected with this subject is,

II. The hatred of the unjust—

That men should hate those who injure them, will not create in us any surprise; but that they should hate *those whom they have injured*, and *because they have injured them*, may seem strange indeed: but this is really the common course of human events. The instance recorded in our text is worthy of particular notice. The injury which Amnon had done to Tamar was beyond measure great: and, if his love underwent any change at all, we might well suppose that it would give way to pity and compassion. But behold, instead of harbouring any tender emotions

towards her, he was instantly inflamed with the most inveterate resentment ; insomuch that, ardent as his love had been, his hatred now far exceeded it. But this change was founded in human nature, and was precisely such as injustice is calculated to produce. We hate those whom we have injured,

1. Because we have lowered ourselves in their esteem—

[We all affect the esteem of our fellow-creatures ; and it is well to do so : “ a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.” Whilst we are unconscious of having done any thing to forfeit a person’s esteem, we conclude, as a matter of course, that we possess it : but when we are sensible that we have injured him in any respect, we feel that we have suffered loss in his esteem : and this loss we resent as an injury done to ourselves. It is by no means uncommon for persons so to expose themselves to censure by their follies, as to render the society in which they mix, and even the town or village in which they live, disgustful to them ; and they hate all the people whose censure they have incurred, for no other reason than because they have seen and noticed the improprieties of their conduct. Their pride is wounded ; and they impute that to the malignity of others, which they should ascribe rather to their own folly. Thus it is with respect to injuries of every kind : we feel that the commission of them lessens our character in the eyes of him whom we have injured ; and not having any suitable humiliation in our own souls, we impute that to malignity in him, which is the sole fruit of our injustice.]

2. Because we have enabled him to lower us in the estimation of others—

[We can easily go to sleep in sin, provided our iniquity be unknown ; but a discovery of it fills us with the most pungent grief. Now if we have injured any person, we have put ourselves in the power of that person, so that he can inflict upon us the severest wounds, by exposing our conduct to public reprehension. Some indeed there are who care but little about their character, and who are therefore indifferent whether their conduct be exposed or not : but, where character is dear to a man, and he has done any thing which would involve him in much disgrace, there his hatred will proportionably rise against the person that is privy to his shame. We cannot find a more striking instance of this than in the history of David. He had

injured his friend Uriah in the basest manner; and used all possible methods to conceal his shame. Having failed in these, he found that Uriah must of necessity ere long discover the injury he had received; and therefore he longed for Uriah's death; yea, he actually laid a snare for his life, and was delighted to hear that he had successfully attained his murderous object. We are far from saying that every man's resentment would carry him to this length, even where the same grounds for it existed: but we have no doubt, that there is not any one who, in similar circumstances, would not rejoice to hear that the person whom he had injured was dead: all concern about his life would be swallowed up in the hope of concealing his own shame, and retaining an unblemished character before men.]

3. Because we conceive him to be our enemy—

[It is natural to suppose that those whom we have injured are our enemies: and that consideration is quite sufficient to excite hatred in the bosom of an unjust man. Hence Solomon observes, "A lying tongue hateth those that are afflicted by it^d." Indeed it is from this consideration that men hate the Scriptures, and even God himself: they know that the Scriptures are against them, and that God is displeased with them: and therefore "they hate the light, and will not come to the light, lest their deeds should be reproved:" yea, they say, "Make the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us;" or, as the fool in his heart, "I wish there were no God^e!" In like manner they hate pious ministers also, as Ahab did; "I hate Micaiah, because he doth not speak good concerning me, but evil." Whilst we suppose that men love us, there is no difficulty in loving them: the vilest of publicans and sinners will do this: but when we think that our persons or our characters are odious to others, it requires much grace to feel a loving spirit towards them; a grace which no ungodly man can exercise, nor any unjust man possess. Resentment is the only fruit which nature, so circumstanced, will produce.]

Many valuable LESSONS may be learned from this subject: we may see in particular the importance,

1. Of cultivating a religious principle—

[Had Amnon felt the power of religion in his soul, he would have withstood the first impulse of his desire, and said, "How shall I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Or, if he had been overcome with the temptation, he would at least have sought to repair the injury he had done, and not have

^d Prov. xxvi. 28.

^e Isai. xxx. 11. Ps. xiv. 1.

aggravated it by such cruel treatment. But, being destitute of all religious principle, he was the sport of every lust, and was driven from one extreme to another, as a leaf before the wind. And what can we expect, but to be equally unstable, though we should not commit exactly the same enormities as he? Yes; nothing but a religious principle will keep us firm. If we have the fear of God in our hearts, we shall “stand in awe, and not sin,” even though we know that our iniquity will not be discovered by mortal eyes: and if we have the love of Christ in our hearts, that will constrain us to live to him, in a holy conformity to his will, and in a cheerful obedience to his commands.]

2. Of associating with pious friends—

[Had Jonadab been pious, he would have instantly endeavoured to divert Amnon from his purpose: but, being himself an ungodly man, he offered himself a pander to Amnon’s lusts, and suggested to him the plan whereby he might obtain the gratification he desired. Thus was he, in fact, the instrument whereby these horrid impieties were accomplished. Thus it is with ungodly companions at all times: instead of discountenancing evil, they will encourage it, and facilitate the execution of it to the uttermost. Knowing then, as we do, how apt we are to imbibe the spirit of our friends, should we not be careful with whom we associate? Should we not select our friends from the wise and good, rather than from among the giddy and profane? “He that walketh with wise men,” says Solomon, “will be wise; but a companion of fools shall be destroyed^f.” Let us remember that “evil communications will corrupt good manners;” and let us choose those for our associates in this world, whom we shall wish to dwell with in the world to come.]

3. Of setting a good example—

[We cannot but trace, in some degree at least, the wickedness of Amnon to the sad example which David had set him. Amnon would be ready to excuse his own conduct towards Tamar, in comparison of David towards Bathsheba and Uriah. “At all events,” he would say, “my father cannot be very severe in censuring me, when he recollects what he himself has done.” In like manner, if we give the world occasion to reproach us, we shall lose all weight and influence in reproving them; yea, we shall harden them in their iniquities, and encourage them to vindicate themselves from our example. Let parents, and masters, and all that are in authority, bear this in mind, that one bad act of theirs will do more to countenance sin, than ten good admonitions will do to repress it.

^f Prov. xiii. 20.

Let religious professors in particular remember it; for if they cast a stumbling-block before men, they will be accountable to God for all the evil that ensues. Methinks, in this, and in many subsequent events, David could not but see the sad fruit of his own iniquities; and that very consideration would add ten-fold poignancy to all his grief: and many parents may find in the conduct of their children the severest reprehension for their own neglects. Let us guard against all such occasion for self-reproach; and endeavour so to act, that we may be able to say to all around us, "Whatsoever ye have seen and heard in me, do, and the God of peace shall be with you."]

CCCXIX.

DAVID DRIVEN FROM HIS THRONE BY ABSALOM.

2 Sam. xv. 25, 26. *And the king said unto Zadok, Carry back the ark of God into the city: if I shall find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me again, and shew me both it, and his habitation: but if he thus say, I have no delight in thee; behold, here am I, let him do to me as seemeth good unto him.*

SIN, though forgiven, rarely passes unpunished in this present world: on the contrary, God marks his indignation against it here, in order to embitter it the more to the offender who has committed it, and to endear to him the more that mercy which has been exercised towards him. At the very time that he forgave the sin of David, he declared to the pardoned penitent, that the sword should never pass from his house, even to the latest hour. Accordingly we find, that David was afflicted in no common degree in his own family; and in such a way as strongly to bring his sins to his remembrance. He had dishonoured the wife of his friend Uriah; and his own son Amnon violates his daughter Tamar. He had contrived and accomplished the death of Uriah; and his son Absalom contrived and accomplished the death of his own brother Amnon. He had dishonoured God in the face of the whole world; and he himself is driven with scorn and infamy from his throne. Yet, though in this respect a monument of God's displeasure, he was now living nigh to God,

in the exercise of all holy duties, and heavenly affections. At no period of his life was grace more in exercise within him, as appears from the spirit which he manifested under his afflictions. To exhibit this spirit in its true colours, and to make a suitable improvement of it for our own souls, is the scope and object of our present discourse.

I. Mark his spirit and conduct under his afflictions—

To two points in particular the text calls our attention :

1. His reverence for God—

[David having suddenly fled from Jerusalem in order to escape from the sword of Absalom, Zadok and the Levites brought forth the ark to David, that he might be able in this emergency to consult it. But David ordered Zadok to carry it back: for, though nothing in the world was so desirable to him as the presence of God, he regarded this measure as highly inexpedient.

It was *unauthorized*; and therefore wrong. That sacred symbol of the Deity was not to be moved about according to the wishes or conceits of men. In the wilderness it had never moved, but as the pillar and the cloud, in which the Deity resided, led the way. And to dispose of it in this manner, without any direction from God, was such an act of impious presumption as he dared not to commit. He well remembered the rebuke which he himself had met with, when, with the best intentions, he had moved the ark without attending to the forms prescribed by God himself; suffering it to be drawn in a cart by oxen, instead of carrying it on the shoulders of the Levites: for the smiting of Uzzah was a testimony of God's displeasure against him for his inattention, no less than against Uzzah himself for his presumption^a. He remembered too the judgments inflicted on above fifty thousand men of Bethshemesh for daring to look into the ark^b: and therefore he trembled at the thought of acting towards it with irreverence or indiscretion.

It was also *unnecessary*. He knew by experience that God's presence was not confined to the ark; but that he was accessible to his people at all times, and in all places. Often had he, when driven out from Jerusalem by Saul, made known his requests in prayer to God, and obtained from him the most gracious answers: and therefore he doubted not but that God would still continue to him his gracious communications in the

^a 1 Chron. xv. 13.

^b 1 Sam. vi. 19.

time of need, notwithstanding the absence of that symbol, through which, under other circumstances, he ought to have been approached.

It was moreover *unavailing*. What could the ark do, unless accompanied by God himself? What had it done for Israel when taken from Shiloh to protect them against the Philistines? Of itself it had no power: and therefore it was taken prisoner by the Philistines, whilst those who bare it were slain^c. And what if this unauthorized measure should lead to a similar result? How could he ever lift up his head again, after having brought such dishonour upon God?

It was *impious*. What was this, but to transfer to a creature the attributes of Deity, and to expect from the ark the help which could proceed from God alone? This would have been to provoke God to jealousy, and to excite his displeasure at the very time that he most needed an interest in his favour.

On these grounds David sent back the ark; and humbly committed his cause into the hands of his invisible but almighty Protector.]

2. His submission to God—

[Exceeding heavy were the afflictions of David at this time. He was driven from his throne; in hourly danger of being destroyed with all his faithful attendants; and this through the ambition and cruelty of his favourite son. Forsaken by some of his most endeared friends, and loaded with curses by his envenomed enemies, he fled in the most disconsolate state that can be imagined. Hear the pathetic account given of him in the following context: “David went up by the ascent of Mount Olivet, and wept as he went up, and had his head covered; and he went barefoot. And all the people that were with him covered every man his head; and they went up, weeping as they went up^d.” But his afflictions were great, no less in a spiritual than in a temporal view. Indeed it is in this view that he chiefly complains of them throughout the Psalms^e — — —

But in the midst of all, he submitted meekly to the painful dispensation, leaving it to God to order for him whatsoever in His wisdom he should see fit. He knew that, if God should interpose in his behalf, all should yet issue well, and he should yet again worship God in his sanctuary: but, if God had ordained otherwise, he was prepared to kiss the rod, and to bless the hand that chastised him with it. “If I shall find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me again, and shew me both the ark and his habitation: but if he thus say,

^c 1 Sam. iv. 11.

^d ver. 30.

^e See Ps. xlii. 1—5, 10. and xliii. 3, 4. and lxxxiv. 1—4.

I have no delight in thee ; behold, here am I, let him do unto me as seemeth good unto him."

In all this he was doubtless actuated by a sense of his own extreme unworthiness : he saw that the affliction which was laid upon him, was an accomplishment of the threatening long since denounced against him by God himself, and "he received it as the punishment of his iniquity." At the same time, assured in his own mind that the strokes were inflicted by a loving Father, and not by an avenging Judge, he desired only that God should glorify himself in any way which he saw best : "I was dumb, and opened not my mouth, because thou didst it^f."

Confine not however your views to David ; but,

II. Improve the subject for the benefit of your own souls—

1. See here the sufferings of that Saviour whom he typified—

[David was a most remarkable type of Christ, no less in his sufferings than in his exaltation to the throne of Israel. In all the Psalms where he speaks of his sufferings, he speaks quite as much in the person of the Messiah as in his own person^g — — — Even where he seems most exclusively to refer to his own case, he is quoted by St. Paul as pre-eminently typifying the Lord Jesus : "Innumerable evils have compassed me about : mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, that I am not able to look up ; they are more than the hairs of my head ; therefore my heart faileth me." Doubtless these words, as far as they relate to Christ, speak of him only as bearing the sins of others, whilst David suffered only for his own : but the whole Psalm is in a very peculiar degree descriptive of the Lord Jesus^h. Behold Jesus then as cast out by his whole nation, who said, "We will not have this man to reign over usⁱ!" Behold him forsaken by his own Disciples whom he loved, and betrayed by one who had eaten bread with him, even by Judas, who was actually typified by Achitophel^k ! Behold him going over that very brook Kedron^l, pursued by armed bands^m, who sought and laboured to destroy him !

But behold more particularly His deportment under his afflictions. Here was David pre-eminently a type of Him. When the bitter cup was put into his hands, though he prayed for the removal of it, he said, "Not my will, but thine be

^f Ps. xxxix. 9.

^g See Ps. xxii. and lxix.

^h Compare Ps. xl. 6—8. with Heb. x. 5—9.

ⁱ ver. 23, with John xviii. 1.

^k Ps. xli. 9. with John xiii. 18.

^l John xviii. 1.

^m John xviii. 3.

done." When loaded with execrations, as David was by Shimei, he submitted meekly to the insults, as the Apostle says; "When he was reviled, he reviled not again; when he suffered, threatened not; but committed himself to Him that judgeth righteously." As David too was chiefly solicitous for the welfare of the very man who sought his life, (giving express charge to all to spare the life of Absalom,) so did our blessed Lord pray and plead for his murderers; "Father, forgive them! for they know not what they do."

Thus whilst you admire the spirit and conduct of David, you may well take occasion to admire the infinitely sublimer spirit of the Lord Jesus.]

2. Look to him as an example under any sufferings which you yourselves may be called to bear—

[This is the improvement which an inspired Apostle teaches us to make of the subject: "Take, my brethren," says St. James, "the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience." We ourselves are all exposed to sufferings, even as David was: for "we are born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward:" nor do we know how soon troubles may come upon us. The possession of a crown was no exemption to David; nor can any situation, in which we may be, prove an exemption to us. The more secure we are in our own apprehension, the more reason we have to expect that some calamity is near at hand. The saying, "My mountain stands strong; I shall not be moved;" will be a prelude to the hiding of God's face, and the incursion of some heavy trouble". The very things to which we looked for comfort may become an occasion of the bitterest anguish. Absalom was considered as the most beautiful youth in all Israel, and no doubt had often been looked upon by David with inexpressible delight; yet this was the man who assassinated his brother and dethroned his father. And thus it is often found, at this day, that the objects of our fondest delight become, not the innocent occasions only, but even the guilty sources, of our bitterest affliction.

Are there then any amongst us oppressed with trouble? Let us look to David, and after his example commit our cause to God with meek submission and with humble affiance. Let us see the hand of God in our trials, and view men only as his instruments, raised up by him to fulfil and execute his will^o. Let us view men and devils only as the axe or saw in the hand of him that uses it; and, under a sense of our own extreme unworthiness, let us "receive evil at the Lord's hands as well

ⁿ Ps. xxx. 6, 7.

^o Ps. xvii. 13. Isai. x. 5, 15.

as good," and "bless him" equally for whichever in his providence he ordains for us^p.]

3. Seek a kingdom of which you can never be dispossessed—

[David was at that time the mightiest monarch upon earth: yet how soon, and how easily, was he dispossessed of his throne. To what then can we look as stable and permanent? Alas! like Shebna, we may in an instant be cast out from all that we possess, even as a stone is cast out from a sling^q. But there is "a kingdom which cannot be moved," and "against which the gates of hell shall not prevail." This is the inheritance which our Lord Jesus Christ will give to all who truly believe in him — — — Of this David was secure: and therefore he regarded not the loss of an earthly kingdom; but willingly submitted to it, if God had so ordained. Do ye likewise secure a portion that is out of the reach of any enemies. Have God for your friend; and you need not care who is your enemy: for "if He be for you, none can with any effect be against you." You may look with complacency on the gathering storm, and defy all the powers of earth and hell to hurt you. So did David^r; and so did Paul^s: and so may the least and weakest of the human race: for "the lame shall take the prey^t:" though they were prisoners too, "they should take those captives, whose captives they were; and should rule over their oppressors^u:" yea, though they were even slain, yet should they rise to resume the conflict; and "their enemies should fall under the slain^x." "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom^y:" and, once possessed of that, "all tears shall be wiped away from your eyes for ever^z."]

^p Job i. 21.

^r Ps. xlv. 1—3.

^t Isai. xxxiii. 23. and xxvi. 6.

^x Isai. x. 4. ^y Luke xii. 32.

^q Isai. xxii. 15—19.

^s Rom. viii. 35—39.

^u Isai. xiv. 2.

^z Rev. xxi. 3, 4.

CCCXX.

DAVID'S SUBMISSION TO HIS AFFLICTIONS.

2 Sam. xv. 30. *And David went up by the ascent of Mount Olivet, and wept as he went up, and had his head covered, and he went barefoot: and all the people that was with him covered every man his head, and they went up, weeping as they went up.*

A CONSCIOUSNESS of ill desert has a tendency to reconcile us to the afflictions with which our sins

are visited. In some respect indeed it embitters our trials, which the testimony of a good conscience would alleviate: but in other respects it has a good effect, in that it silences every murmur against the dispensations of a righteous Providence. The troubles which David had experienced in his family as the punishment of his own sins, had already been great and manifold: but in the rebellion of Absalom they were risen to their height: they were borne however with a spirit of piety suited to his state, and worthy of his high character.

Let us consider,

I. The circumstances in which he was placed—

These were most afflictive—

[He was now driven from his throne, banished from the ordinances of religion, and in danger of immediate destruction. Now considering him as a man, such adversity must be painful in the extreme; and still more when we recollect that he was *a king*, and therefore susceptible of pain in proportion to the degradation which he suffered. But view him as *a man of humanity*, and then how distressing must it be to see his country involved in civil war, and to be himself on the eve of a bloody engagement with thousands of his own subjects! View him also as *a man of piety*, driven from the ordinances of religion, and suffering under the rebukes of an offended God; what can be conceived more distressing than such a state as his?]

But they derived ten-fold poignancy from the source from whence they flowed—

[The people that inflicted these wounds were *his own subjects*. Had he been attacked by foreign enemies, he would have gone forth against them with alacrity: but to be constrained to fight with those over whom he had reigned so many years, in whose defence he had so often exposed his own life, and for whose benefit he had laboured all his days, this filled him with the deepest grief^a.

But amongst the insurgents was *his own peculiar friend*, from whose counsel and assistance he might have derived the greatest benefit. How keenly he felt this disappointment, we learn from the lamentation he poured out on this memorable occasion^b: and who that has known the sweets of friendship must not sympathize with him?

^a Ps. lv. 1—8. with Zech. xiii. 6.

^b Ps. lv. 12—14.

But the bitterest ingredient in his cup was, that it was mixed for him by *his own son*; that son, whom he had so recently, and so undeservedly received to favour, and in whose professions of piety he had begun to rejoice^c. As the most exalted joys, so also the acutest sorrows, flow from those who stand to us in the relation of children: and in proportion as this worthless son was beloved by him, was the anguish occasioned by his rebellious conduct. The insulting language of Shimei was of no account in the mind of David; *that* he was willing to bear^d: but to be so treated by his beloved Absalom, was a grief almost insupportable^e. And we doubt not but that every tender parent will readily understand how greatly such a consideration must have overwhelmed his mind.]

Let us next proceed to notice,

II. His conduct under those circumstances—

Zadok and Abiathar had brought to him the ark, judging that it must be a comfort and a benefit to him to have access to God under his heavy trials. But David ordered them to carry back the ark, being himself prepared for every event, inasmuch as he enjoyed in his own soul,

1. A confidence in God's care—

[David well knew that God's presence was not confined to the ark, nor his agency necessarily connected with it. He knew that wherever his enemies might drive him, God's ear would be open to his prayer, and his arm be extended for his relief. Hence, though he honoured the ark as the symbol of God's presence, he did not confide in *it*: but trusted in God, who was represented by it. He knew that, if God should be on his side, the efforts of his enemies would be all in vain; and that, however menacing their aspect at the present, he should in due time be brought back again in safety.]

Such is the confidence which God's people should maintain under all the trials which they may be called to endure. "The name of God is a strong tower to which they may run," and in which they may defy their bitterest enemies. "If He be for them, none can be against them;" "nor can any weapon that is formed against them prosper." It is the privilege of every saint to know, that his affairs are in God's hands; and that as nothing *can* be done but by the divine permission, so nothing *shall* be done, which shall not work for his spiritual and eternal good. The language of his soul therefore should at all times be, "The Lord is on my side; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me" — — —]

^c 2 Sam. xv. 7—9.

^d 2 Sam. xvi. 5—11.

^e ver. 30.

2. A submission to his will—

[What God might have ordained respecting him, David did not know; nor was he curious to inquire: but, whatever might be the issue of his present afflictions, he was contented and satisfied. Well he knew that he deserved all that God could lay upon him; and he was ready to say, “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him^f.” This is one fruit of sin, if I may so speak; or rather, of that humiliation which accompanies true repentance: we become reconciled to whatever God may do, seeing that any chastisement in this world must be less than our iniquities have deserved. O that in the prospect of the heaviest calamities we might have such a view of our ill desert, as should dispose us humbly to commit ourselves into God's hands, and cordially to welcome every trial which his all-wise providence may appoint for us! Under every affliction, our acquiescence should be like that of Eli, “It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good.”]

^f Mic. vii. 9.

CCCXXI.

DAVID'S PATIENCE AND FORBEARANCE.

2 Sam. xvi. 5—12. *And when king David came to Bahurim, behold, thence came out a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera: he came forth, and cursed still as he came. And he cast stones at David, and at all the servants of king David: and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. And thus said Shimei when he cursed, Come out, come out, thou bloody man, and thou man of Belial: the Lord hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose stead thou hast reigned; and the Lord hath delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom thy son: and, behold, thou art taken in thy mischief, because thou art a bloody man. Then said Abishai the son of Zeruiah unto the king, Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over, I pray thee, and take off his head. And the king said, What have I to do with you, ye sons of Zeruiah? so let him curse, because the Lord hath said unto him, Curse David. Who shall then say, Wherefore hast thou done so? And David said to Abishai, and to all his servants, Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life: how much more now may this Benjamite do it? Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him. It may*

be that the Lord will look on mine affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day.

IT is thought by many, that situations of rank and eminence are conducive to happiness. But the very reverse of this will be found true for the most part, because persons in authority are beset with numberless temptations, to which their inferiors are scarcely at all exposed. Behold David exalted to a throne; and see to what trials he was reduced, by those who sought his favour, or envied him his power! It is the unhappy lot of kings to be surrounded no less by lying friends, than by bitter enemies. When David fled from Absalom, Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth, the son of Saul, met him with a present of needful provisions for himself and followers, under a feigned plea, that his master had joined the conspiracy of Absalom, in the hope of regaining his father's kingdom: and thus he obtained from David an hasty and inadvertent grant of all Mephibosheth's possessions; a grant, which David afterwards, when better informed, was constrained to rescind. Scarcely had David been thus betrayed by a pretended friend, before he was fiercely assaulted by a bitter enemy, who now took advantage of his misfortunes to load him with all manner of reproaches. From this evil, however, David escaped with far greater honour to himself. In the former case he was imposed upon, and was led to act with unwise precipitation: but in this latter case, when urged to avenge himself on the delinquent, he forbore; and thus manifested a disposition of mind that is worthy of universal imitation.

To place David's conduct in its true light, I will set before you,

I. His heavy trial—

His condition, independent of Shimei's conduct, was exceedingly afflictive—

[He was now driven from his throne, and forced to flee for his life. To this he was forced by his own subjects, led on by his most favourite son, Absalom. To be reduced to such an extremity by a foreign foe would have been an exceeding

great calamity: but to be brought to it by his own beloved son, at the head of his rebellious subjects, was as afflictive a dispensation as could well be conceived.

But in this cup of sorrow there was an ingredient that was incomparably more bitter than even death itself; namely, a consciousness that it proceeded from God, as a punishment of the sin he had committed in the matter of Uriah. Nathan had long since delivered to him this warning from the Lord: "Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine house^a." And this judgment had already been executed in part, by Amnon's ravishing of his sister Tamar; and by Absalom's murder of his brother Amnon; (in both of which there was an awful correspondence with his own sins in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah:) and now it came home more immediately to his own person, in the conduct of Absalom towards himself. This consciousness very deeply oppressed his mind, and added a ten-fold poignancy to all his other stings.]

But the conduct of Shimei greatly aggravated his misfortunes at this time—

[It came upon him at a time when he was wounded, and disconsolate, under the rebukes of the Almighty^b. And the bitterness of this man's reproaches could scarcely be exceeded. Shimei, being a Benjamite, was zealous for his own tribe, from whence the sovereign authority had been transferred to the tribe of Judah. (Such jealousies, alas! pervade all ranks and classes of society throughout the world, from rival states to rival districts, communities, towns, families, and parties of every description: and often the feelings subsisting between the adverse parties, are scarcely less acrimonious than those of Shimei himself.) Besides, being of the family of Saul, perhaps Shimei's prospects in life were in a great measure blasted: and therefore, whilst he regarded David as the occasion of his ruin, he considered the Deity himself as vindicating his cause, in the punishment of the usurper. But his accusation of David, as having imbrued his hands in the blood of Saul, was without the least foundation: for it was well known that he had not been in the least degree accessory to the death of Saul, or Jonathan, or of Abner, or Ishbosheth, or of any whose blood was now laid to his charge. But such an accusation, at such a time, was most distressing to the feelings of the royal sufferer: and the rather too, because it brought the more forcibly to his mind the evils which he had indeed committed, and for which God was indeed inflicting upon him this sore punishment.]

We wonder not at the indignation of Abishai,

^a 2 Sam. xii. 11.

^b Ps. lxix. 26.

or at the proposal which he made to avenge his master's cause on this insulting adversary. But we do wonder at David's forbearance under this heavy trial, and at,

II. His meek submission to it—

David would not suffer Abishai to execute his project, and to inflict on this daring rebel the deserved punishment. He chose rather to endure all the insults that were heaped upon him: and to this he was led by two considerations:

1. He saw the hand of God in this trial—

[Repeatedly does he say, that “God had bidden this virulent adversary to curse him:” and from that consideration he puts the question to Abishai, “Who then shall say, Wherefore hast thou done so^e?” Of course, he did not imagine that God had *enjoined* this man to behave thus, or had actually *infused into his mind a disposition* to commit so great a transgression. When “God hardened the heart of Pharaoh^d,” he only left him to harden his own heart: and when he “sent forth an evil and lying spirit into the prophets of Ahab,” he only gave permission to the evil spirit to enter into them^e. In fact, the creature, even whilst he acts most freely, executes, even as the murderers of our blessed Lord did, “what *His* mind and *His* counsel had determined before to be done^f.” The creature, whatever his own mind and purpose may be, is only “a rod, or staff, or sword in Jehovah's hand,” to execute his holy will^g. And though this does not excuse the creature, who, in fact, thinks of doing his own will only, it must reconcile us to what is done, no less than if it had been done directly and immediately by God himself. Thus Job viewed the losses he sustained through the rapacity of the Chaldeans and Sabeans, who took away all his cattle, and slew his servants: “Shall I receive good at the Lord's hands, and shall I not receive evil? The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord^h.” From this consideration, David was enabled to submit with meekness to the invectives of Shimei, and to say, as Eli, “It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him goodⁱ.” This is the account he himself gives us: “I was dumb, and opened not my mouth, because thou didst it^k.”]

2. He looked to God to overrule it for his good—

^e ver. 10, 11.

^d Exod. iv. 21.

^e 1 Kings xxii. 21—23.

^f Acts iv. 28.

^g Isai. x. 5—7.

^h Job i. 21. and ii. 10.

ⁱ 1 Sam. iii. 18.

^k Ps. xxxix. 9.

[It is God's privilege to bring good out of evil, for the benefit of his believing people. David was no stranger to the history of Joseph, nor of the testimony which Joseph bore respecting the sufferings which had been inflicted on him by his brethren: "It was not you that sent me hither; but God, to save your lives by a great deliverance." "Ye indeed thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save much people alive¹." And he fondly hoped that God would in some way sanctify to him this dispensation. He well knew, that God "chastens his people for their profit, to make them partakers of his holiness: and that affliction, though not joyous at the present, but grievous, will, through God's blessing upon it, work out the peaceable fruits of righteousness to them that are exercised thereby^m." And he hoped that God would make this severe visitation "work for his goodⁿ;" or, at all events, whatever might be the effect of it here, it would issue well at the last, by "working out for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory in the eternal world^o." This hope pacified and composed his mind, and enabled him to "possess his soul in patience;" whilst Abishai, yielding to the impulse of an irritated mind, would gladly have executed on the offender the judgment he deserved.]

LEARN, then, Brethren, from this subject,

1. What spirit you are to manifest under any injuries you sustain—

[In no respect are you to indulge an angry and vindictive spirit; but, rather, to follow the example of our blessed Lord, who, under the most injurious treatment that ever was endured in this world, opened not his mouth, but was dumb, even as a "sheep before its shearers." Instead of rendering evil for evil, we are to return nothing but good; and to seek for victory in no other way; as God has said, "Be not overcome of evil; but overcome evil with good." Doubtless this is a difficult path: but it will surely bring upon us the divine blessing, both in this world and in the world to come.]

2. How you are to obtain it—

[You have seen what considerations influenced the mind of David: and the same will produce a similar effect on your minds. The first thing to be sought by you is a deep sense of your own sinfulness. Let *that* abide upon your minds, and nothing that man can inflict will greatly wound you. How heavy soever your trial may be, you will say, "Shall a living

¹ Gen. xlv. 7, 8. and l. 20.

^m Heb. xii. 10, 11.

ⁿ Rom. viii. 28.

^o 2 Cor. iv. 17.

man complain? a man for the punishment of his sins^p?" Any thing short of the miseries of hell, especially if it tend to avert those miseries, will be accounted rather a mercy to be thankful for, than a judgment to be deplored^q.

The next thing is, to realize in your souls the universal agency of Divine Providence; so as to see, that "no trouble whatever springs out of the dust^r," but that every thing, even to the falling of a sparrow, or of a hair from your head, is ordered of the Lord^s. Your nature may indeed recoil from suffering; and you may deprecate it, even as our Lord himself did, when he desired that the cup which had been put into his hands might pass away from him. But this you will do with submission, saying, "Not my will, but thine be done:" and when you see what the Lord's will is, you will chide your reluctant spirit, saying, "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it^t?"

Finally, look to the issue of your trials, and then you will be moved by nothing that either men or devils can do^u. You have "seen in the case of Job *the end of the Lord*," even in this world^x. And, if the furnace be to purge away your dross, you will not greatly regret that God suffers you to be put into it. You will expect his presence with you in your troubles for your comfort and support^y, and a rich compensation for them in the world to come^z.

Get but these thoughts wrought into your hearts, and you will bear with resignation even the heaviest calamities, and "commit your souls to God in well doing, as into the hands of a faithful Creator^a."]]

^p Lam. iii. 39.

^q Matt. v. 10—12. 1 Pet. iv. 12, 13.

^r Job v. 6.

^s Matt. x. 29, 30.

^t John xviii. 11.

^u Acts xx. 24.

^x Jam. v. 11.

^y Mal. iii. 3. Dan. iii. 25.

^z 2 Tim. ii. 12. Rev. vii. 14, 15.

^a 1 Pet. iv. 19.

CCCXXII.

DAVID'S LAMENTATION OVER ABSALOM.

2 Sam. xviii. 33. *And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and, as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!*

THIS life is at best a chequered scene: the happiness of man is rarely of long continuance; nor is it ever altogether without alloy: the sweetest cup we taste has always in it, either in a greater or less

degree, an infusion of gall: it is in heaven alone that our blessedness is complete. David had attained a full possession of the throne of Israel: but troubles arose to him from various quarters, and especially from his own family; even his own son rose up in rebellion against him, to dethrone him. The rebellion was scarcely matured before it was quashed: but alas! his son, his favourite son, was slain: and how bitterly he laid to heart this calamity, may be seen from the words which we have now read.

We propose to notice,

I. The grief of David for the loss of Absalom—

This was in some respects right and commendable—

[*He did well in mourning for the death of a son.* God has put into the heart of parents a love for their offspring: and indeed such a love was necessary to counterbalance the cares and troubles which a family entails. That love of necessity contains in it the seeds of sorrow, when evil befalls the offspring, or death snatches them away. Even the irrational creation are deeply penetrated with this feeling, and manifest it in a very high degree, whenever the loss of their offspring calls it into exercise. We wonder not, therefore, that a man of David's piety should greatly bewail the death of his favourite son. We do not disapprove of him when for seven successive days he wept, and fasted, and prayed for the life of his dying infant; much less can we blame his grief for a son of mature age and eminent accomplishments.

But still more was his grief justified, when we consider the circumstances under which his son was taken away. Absalom, alas! was very unfit to die: he was a man of an abandoned character. He was an assassin, and had murdered his own brother Amnon. He was a rebel against the king whom God himself had called to the throne, even against his own father. He was, in heart at least and design, a murderer of his own father: for when the proposal was made by Achitophel so to contrive the attack as to destroy his father only, it was highly gratifying to this unnatural son. Moreover, *for the express purpose* of making himself "abhorred by his father," and of precluding all possibility of reconciliation with him, "he went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel." Such was the state of Absalom, when death arrested him. What a tremendous load of guilt was here, under the whole of which

he expired, without any space given him for repentance ! Well then might David weep for him, even tears of blood. David well knew the misery of those who died in their sins, and had often wept for the inconsiderateness of those who overlooked their danger : well therefore might he weep as he did for the miserable end of Absalom.]

In other respects it certainly was wrong—

[The dispensation was indeed most afflictive ; but still it called for different feelings in the mind of David. In it there was a mixture of mercy and of judgment : and, if he had viewed it aright, his sorrows would have been tempered with resignation and gratitude. The death of Absalom was in part a *punishment of David's sin* in the matter of Uriah ; and therefore when the judgment was inflicted, he should, like Aaron, have “ held his peace^a,” or have said, like Eli, “ It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good^b.” The death of Absalom was also a *mercy both to David and to all Israel*, inasmuch as it put a speedy end to the calamities of civil war, and was the means of re-establishing David on the throne of Israel. Should not this then have called for thanksgiving on the part of David ? Yet behold, there was but too much justice in the remark of Joab, that David was insensible of all these mercies ; and that he would have been better pleased with the loss of all his faithful adherents that had exposed their lives for him, than of this graceless wretch who had sought his destruction^c. Surely such grief could not be justified : after all the allowance that must be made for the affection of a parent, and the compassion of a saint, we are constrained to acknowledge, that the feelings of David on this occasion were ill regulated and unchastised. He seems almost to have quarrelled with God, when he should rather have said, like Job, “ The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away ; blessed be the name of the Lord^d !”]

Much instruction however may be gathered from this expression of David's grief. Let us proceed to consider,

II. The lessons it is calculated to teach us—

Much instruction does it impart,

1. To men in general—

[It teaches us loudly to *moderate our affections towards the creature*. Whatever God bestow upon us, we are apt to fix our affections too strongly on it, and to forget that it is a *loan* rather than a *gift* : we forget that it still remains the Lord's,

^a Lev. x. 3.

^c 2 Sam. xix. 3—6.

^b 1 Sam. iii. 18.

^d Job i. 21.

and that he has a right to call for it whenever he will. Hence if it be unexpectedly withdrawn from us, we are ready to grieve and murmur, as if every source of happiness were cut off from us: because a cistern is broken, we lament, as if the fountain itself also were dried up. This is especially the case in reference to near and dear relations: but such inordinate regard to the creature is idolatry; and it will sooner or later bring its own punishment along with it.

It teaches us also *to proportion our sorrows to the occasion*. Sorrow is allowable, especially for the loss of our friends or relatives. So far was our Lord from condemning the grief of Martha and Mary for the death of their brother, that he himself joined in it; "Jesus wept." Grief too on such occasions may sometimes be very deep. If, for instance, a minister be removed in the midst of all his usefulness, as Stephen was, there is good reason why "great lamentation should be made for him," because the loss of such an one to the Church of God is incalculable^e. If a man be not taken away in the midst of life, yet, if he have been eminently good and greatly distinguished, he may also be deeply lamented^f. Nor is this due to *public* characters only: *private* individuals also, who have rendered themselves useful in their day and generation, may well be thus deplored. Dorcas had laid herself out for the comfort and support of the poor: she had assisted them in the way that best suited her ability and their wants: and therefore when she was withdrawn by death, the loss of her was much bewailed, and a lively interest was excited to get her, if possible, restored to life^g. Thus a concern for the general good may fitly increase the tide of our sorrows on the removal of any one by death: but there are occasions, as when any saint is released from a state of deep affliction and distress, when we may rather rejoice over them, as resting from their labours, and happy in the fruition of their God^h. But in any case we must guard against that inordinate sorrow which renders us unmindful of God's mercies, or insensible of our own desert.]

2. To parents and children in particular—

[Parents, surely you may learn from the history before us *to cut off all occasion for self-reproach* in the event of your children's death. No doubt David was too indulgent towards Absalom, and had forbore to punish him as he deserved. And what a bitter reflection it will be to you to think, that you had not exerted yourselves to the utmost of your power for the

^e Acts viii. 2. If this be a *Funeral Sermon*, any observations respecting the character of the deceased may be introduced, where it best accords with the subject as here treated.

^f Gen. i. 7—11.

^g Acts ix. 36—39.

^h Rev. xiv. 13.

repressing of sin in your children, and the cultivating of an heavenly principle in their minds! You well know how God marked his indignation against Eli for this very thingⁱ. His fault was, not that he encouraged his sons to sin, but that he did not exert himself with sufficient energy to reclaim them. O think what you will say, if you neglect to warn, to reprove, and to instruct your children! how will you answer it at the tribunal of God? Are ministers responsible for the souls committed to their charge? so are you for the children whom God has intrusted unto you. He has said to you, as Pharaoh's daughter, "Take these and bring them up for me;" and, if they perish through your neglect, "their blood will be required at your hands." Endeavour then to impress them with a sense of their duty to God. You often try to convince them how much *you* have loved them; but you are apt to forget to shew them how CHRIST hath loved them. David's love to Absalom was nothing in comparison of Christ's to them: Christ did not merely under a momentary conflict of mind *wish* that he had died for them; but he actually *did* die for them, yea, and endured the curse due to their sins, and left the bosom of his Father on purpose that he might do so; and foreseeing from eternity all that he must suffer, he formed the purpose, and never receded from it, till he had accomplished all that was necessary for their salvation: and all this he did, when they were in open rebellion against him. You may convince them of your love, and yet produce no permanent effect upon them; they may continue hostile both to God and you: but convince them of the love of Christ to them, and that will constrain them to live in all dutiful obedience both to God and man.

Children, learn ye also from this history to regard the instructions of your parents. See, in Absalom, the effect and recompence of wilful disobedience! And be careful not to grieve the souls of your parents, by constraining them to "sorrow for you as without hope." If you die before them, what distress will your state occasion! or, if you survive them, how will they be pained in a dying hour to have no prospect of meeting you in a better world! Remember, that however much they love you now, they will be swift witnesses against you in the day of judgment; and all the efforts which they made for your salvation, will only aggravate your eternal condemnation. Be wise then in time, and labour, that whether you survive your parents or die before them, you may be their joy and crown of rejoicing to all eternity.]

ⁱ 1 Sam. ii. 27—34. and iii. 13, 14.

CCCXXIII.

THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE A GROUND FOR INDIFFERENCE
TO THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD.

2 Sam. xix. 34. *And Barzillai said unto the king, How long have I to live?*

GREAT virtues rarely, if ever, exist alone: the soul that gives them birth is actuated by a principle, which is generally, though perhaps not universally, operative. We behold in the history before us an instance of great generosity towards David and his attendants, in their flight from Absalom. And we have a no less amiable instance of modesty in the same character, when David, after the defeat of Absalom, and the consequent restoration of peace, desired to reward the services of his benefactor. "Barzillai had provided David with sustenance while he lay at Mahanaim;" and David now entreated him to come and spend the remainder of his days with him at Jerusalem, that he might repay all his kindness to the utmost of his power: but Barzillai declined the offer, and said, "How long have I to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem?"

The question, "How long have I to live?" is proper for us all to put to ourselves at this time^a: and it will be profitable for us to consider it,

I. In reference to the things of time—

This is certainly its primary import in the passage before us. Barzillai "was a very aged man," and intimated to David, that, on account of his great age, he had no longer any relish for the gratifications of sense, nor could he hope to continue much longer in the world; and that therefore it would ill become him to be an attendant at court, when he ought rather to be thinking only of death^b. In this view the question was most just, and pathetic: and in this view it deserves universal attention.

Our time must of necessity be short—

^a *New-Year's Day*, or on occasion of a *Funeral*.

^b ver. 35—37.

[If we are advanced in life, this truth is obvious; but if we be in the bloom of youth, it is no less certain: for, what is the space of man's life? it is only seventy or eighty years at most: and though that appears long in the prospect, it appears as nothing in the retrospect: every aged man will tell you that his life has passed away as a dream — — — And besides the shortness of life, we must take into the account its uncertainty also: for who can tell what a day, or even an hour, may bring forth? Truly, every man may justly say, "There is but a step between me and death" — — —]

From this consideration we may well rise superior to all the vanities of time and sense—

[Let us suppose a man condemned to death, and about to be executed in a few hours; What would be his feelings in reference to every thing here below? Would he take much complacency in any thing he possessed, or be much affected with any tidings either of loss or gain? No: the things of time and sense would appear to him in their true colours, and be regarded by him as of little importance: the near prospect of that hour when he must bid an eternal farewell to all of them would shew him their emptiness and vanity. Now this is the feeling which every man should cherish. We say not, that any man should neglect his worldly business, or be forgetful of any relative duty; but that he should have his affections withdrawn from every thing here below, and set on things above: he should be divested of anxious care about the acquisition of earthly things; and, in his enjoyment of them, "his moderation should be known unto all men." This is the direction given by St. Paul; and it is founded on the very consideration that is suggested to us in the text^c.]

Just as this sentiment is in reference to the things of time, it is still more so,

II. In reference to the things of eternity—

In the view of eternity, a thousand years may be represented but as "the twinkling of an eye." How long then have any of us to live,

1. That we should neglect our eternal concerns?

[Have any of us made a covenant with death? or has God said to any of us, as to Hezekiah, "I will add unto thy life fifteen years?" Is it not, on the contrary, almost a certainty that God has said concerning many who are here present, "This year thou shalt die?" How then can we think of con-

^c 1 Cor. vii. 29—31.

tinuing any longer to neglect our souls? If repentance be necessary for every child of man; if there be no possibility of acceptance for us but by fleeing for refuge to the Lord Jesus Christ; and, if they who die in an impenitent and unbelieving state must perish for ever; then is it folly to defer the concerns of our souls to a more convenient season, which very probably may never arrive. The concerns of time are so utterly insignificant when compared with those of eternity, that to give them a preference in our minds is not folly only, but madness.]

2. That we should be lukewarm in our attention to them?

[Most men will allow that some attention to the soul is proper: but with the generality, even of those who would be thought religious, the welfare of the soul is only a subordinate and secondary concern. Such lukewarmness however is no less displeasing to God, and injurious to the soul, than total indifference^d. We are apt to think that a little exertion will suffice for the securing of our eternal interests: but is there so little to be done, that it may be finished in a day? or are we sure that so many days will be added to our life as shall make up the deficiency of our zeal and diligence? Do we find that people in a race have time to loiter? How much less then have we, whose career may terminate so soon? And what have we in life that shall compensate for the loss of our souls? Is there any earthly gratification, even if it could be enjoyed a thousand years, to be compared with the felicity of heaven? "Whatever then our hand findeth to do, let us do it with all our might."]

ADDRESS,

1. The young—

[You are looking for years to come; but may soon "be cut down as a flower." Youth is the time most fitted for holy exercises and heavenly employments — — — Begin then without delay, and "remember your Creator in the days of your youth."]

2. Those in middle age—

[You are thinking that you have nearly attained the object of your wishes: but you have found your past attainments vain; and such will be the character of all that you may yet acquire. Temporal duties, we repeat it, are to be performed with diligence; but nothing is of any value in comparison of the soul,]

^d Rev. iii. 15, 16.

3. Those who are far advanced in life—

[Say whether Barzillai's conduct do not well become you? You feel infirmities; you know that in the course of nature you have but a short time to live: let earthly things then be regarded by you with indifference, and heavenly things increasingly occupy your minds. Familiarize yourselves with the thoughts of death and judgment; and "press forward" with ever-increasing alacrity to secure "the prize of your high calling."

At every period of life, but especially in old age, should we pray with David, "Lord, make me to know my end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am^e:" "So teach me to number my days, that I may apply my heart unto wisdom^f."

^e Ps. xxxix. 4.

^f Ps. xc. 12.

CCCXXIV.

FAMINE A PUNISHMENT FOR SIN.

2 Sam. xxi. 1. *Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites.*

THE reign of David was full of troubles occasioned by his own sin: but here we view him and his people afflicted for the sins of others. Saul, his predecessor in the government, had grievously oppressed the Gibeonites, whom Joshua, at his first entrance into Canaan, had pledged the nation, by covenant and by oath, to protect. This breach of covenant God overlooked, as it were, at the time, but now punished by three successive years of famine.

The history teaches us,

I. In what light we should view public calamities—

[The Scripture uniformly represents them as punishments inflicted on account of sin. Personal troubles may be sent for the purpose of calling into action the grace that has been bestowed, and for the advancing of God's glory in the exercise of that grace^a. But the troubles of a nation are judgments sent

^a This was the case with respect to Job.

from God. In this light, "war, famine, pestilence, and the noisome beast," are frequently mentioned; and in this light they should be viewed. We are indeed very averse to regard them as coming from God: we are ready to ascribe them to second causes, and to overlook the first Great Cause of all: but in the Scriptures we behold them, as in the plagues of Egypt, so manifestly proceeding from a divine hand, that we cannot help referring them to God: and thus we ought to do, whatever be the more immediate occasion of them^b— — — David in the first and second years of famine did not behold any expression of the divine displeasure, or think of inquiring wherefore the visitation was sent: it was only when the pressure of the affliction was very heavy and of long continuance, that he thought of tracing the hand of God in it: had he acted in the first year as he did in the third, we have no reason to think that the judgment would have been repeated: but his blindness constrained God to repeat the stroke, till it was noticed as proceeding from him. In like manner God will continue his chastisements to us, till we are made sensible that we have offended him, and provoked his just displeasure.]

Whatever be the calamities with which we are afflicted, we may learn from this history,

II. The way in which we may get them removed—

1. We should inquire into the sinful causes of them—

[David inquired of the Lord; and was informed that the troubles now sent were visitations for sin committed by Saul long ago. The particular offence of Saul is not elsewhere noticed in the history; nor does it appear to have been much regarded by any of the people. His cruelty to the Gibeonites indeed had been notorious; but, as the Gibeonites were the lowest of the people, and not descended from Abraham, the oppression they endured excited no sympathy or compassion. God however resented it; and he will resent the injuries that are done, however mean the objects may be who suffer them, or however great the tyrants may be who inflict them.

And, if we would inquire of the Lord, might not *we* find some cause for the long protracted war in which we have been engaged, and for the repeated failure in our crops of corn? Yes, many public causes may be assigned, such as the general contempt poured upon God's word, and Sabbaths, and name, and people, and, above all, upon his blessed Gospel; and every individual (for it is of individuals that the community is formed) may find in himself abundant reason for those judgments with which God has visited the land^c.

^b Isai. xxvi. 11.

^c Preached in June 1812.

It is highly necessary also that those whose distresses are of a private and personal nature, should take occasion from them to inquire of God, as Job did, "Shew me, O Lord, wherefore thou contendest with me"^d — — —]

2. We should put away whatever is displeasing to God—

[The injuries which had been done to the Gibeonites could not be repaired; nor could Saul who had committed them be punished, because he was now dead. David therefore asked the Gibeonites what redress they required? They sought not any thing for themselves, either in a way of pecuniary compensation, or of freedom from the yoke which they had so long borne: but they required that seven of Saul's sons should be delivered into their hands, to be put to death. This was not a vindictive act, but an act of retributive justice: and it was approved by God, who after the execution of these persons was pacified towards the land^e. Such a kind of retribution would not be justifiable amongst *us*; because the children are not to suffer for the parents' crimes: but, as ordered of God, it was right: and, if the whole truth were known, we should probably find that the sons of Saul had aided and abetted the wicked devices of their father; and that they therefore justly suffered as partners in his crime.

But though we cannot act precisely as David or the Gibeonites did, we may, both nationally and individually, put away the evils which have displeased our God; and indeed we all without exception are bound to "crucify our flesh with its affections and lusts." It is in this way only that we can hope to avert the divine judgments from us; for, though nothing but the blood of Christ can wash away sin, it never will or can avail for the pardon of any, who do not turn unto God in newness of life.]

From hence then we may LEARN,

1. The danger of sin—

[Sin, however forgotten by us, is remembered by God; yea, the whole of our sins, even from the earliest period of our existence, are as much in the immediate sight of God, as if they had been committed this very day: and there is a time when we must answer for them all. Let sin then be repented of, and put away; for it will surely bring the wrath of God on all who retain it unlamented, and unsubdued.]

2. The benefit of Christ's atonement—

[The blood of Saul's sons was poured forth as a sacrifice

^d Job x. 2.

^e ver. 14.

to national justice, and as a means of averting the divine displeasure; and it was considered by God as an atonement for the sin which Saul had committed. How much more then will God accept in our behalf the blood of *his own* Son, who was sent into the world for the express purpose that he might expiate our guilt, and procure for us reconciliation with our offended God! Think of this, all ye who are accused by Satan and your own consciences, and who are trembling for fear of the divine judgments; and know that his blood once shed on Calvary is now available for you, as much as it was the very instant it was shed: it is a fountain, which, if you bathe in it, will effectually cleanse you from all sin — — —]

3. The importance of searching our own hearts—

[The crime of Saul was probably thought a meritorious act both by himself and those whom he employed as his agents in the persecution; for we are told, he sought to extirpate the Gibeonites “from a zeal for the children of Israel and Judah.” But God did not judge as he judged; nor will he form his estimate of *our* conduct from our opinion of it: self-love is apt to blind us, and to make us think well of many things which God abhors. But he will judge our actions according to their quality in his sight. Let us then “search and try our ways, and turn unto the Lord:” and, forasmuch as we are blinded through the influence of our own corruptions, let us beg of him to “search and try our hearts, and to lead us in the way everlasting.”]

CCCXXV.

THE EQUITY OF CHRIST'S GOVERNMENT.

2 Sam. xxiii. 1—4. *Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet Psalmist of Israel, said, The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain.*

THESE words are generally understood as descriptive of the duty of civil governors, and of the happiness of any people who live under a government that is thus administered. But they have doubtless a further reference, even to Christ himself, whose

character they designate in the most appropriate terms. The very energetic manner in which the prophecy before us is introduced, and the strong profession which the writer makes of his immediate inspiration from God, leave no doubt upon the mind, but that something more must be intended in this passage than a mere direction to earthly magistrates. A very small alteration in the Translation will exhibit it in its true light^a. Christ is frequently spoken of in Scripture as the JUST ONE^b, in contradistinction to all others; and as the SUN that enlightens the whole spiritual world^c. The Prophet Malachi, probably having an eye to the very passage before us, combines the two ideas, and foretells the advent of Christ, as “the Sun of Righteousness^d.” In this view of the words, we shall be led to consider,

I. The nature of Christ’s government—

[In the sacred oracles, a peculiar stress is laid on the *equity* of that dominion which Christ exercises over his chosen people^e. And who that has submitted to his government, must not confirm the truth that is so much insisted on? Behold *his laws*; is there one which does not tend to the happiness of his creatures? They are all comprehended in one word, Love; love to God, and love to man: and can any thing be conceived more excellent in itself, or more beneficial to man, than such a law? Well does the Apostle say of it, that it is “holy and just and good^f.” Behold *his administration*; is there any one point in which a righteous governor can excel, that is not found, in its most perfect measure, in him? He relieves the needy, succours the weak, protects the oppressed, and executes judgment without any respect of persons: and though none merit any thing at his hands, he dispenses rewards and punishments in as exact proportion to the conduct of men, as if he weighed their merits in a balance. Who

^a The passage might more properly be translated thus : David the son of Jesse *saith*, and the man, &c. *saith*, The Spirit of the Lord *speaketh* by me, and his word *is* in my tongue; the God of Israel *saith*, the Rock of Israel *speaketh* to me, The JUST ONE ruleth over men; he ruleth in the fear of God: as the light of the morning A SUN shall rise, even a morning without clouds, when the tender grass springeth out of the earth, &c.

^b Acts iii. 14. and vii. 52. and xxii. 14.

^c John viii. 12.

^d Mal. iv. 2. ^e Isai. ix. 7. and xi. 2—5. “*in the fear of the Lord.*”

^f Rom. vii. 12.

ever sought him diligently, without gaining admission to his presence? Who ever implored a blessing at his hands and was rejected? Who ever did much or suffered much for him, without ample testimonies of his approbation? On the other hand, who ever drew back from him, or violated his holy laws, without "receiving in himself that recompence which was meet?" Whatever inequalities may appear in his government (as when virtue is oppressed, and vice is triumphant) he removes them all, by vouchsafing to the sufferer the consolations of his Spirit, and the prospects of his glory. Thus truly may he be said to "rule in the fear of God!"

If prosperity and happiness result from a righteous administration of civil governments, much more are they the portion of Christ's subjects. This is beautifully illustrated in the words before us; wherein his government is further delineated in,

II. The blessed effects of it on all his faithful subjects—

[The sun rising in the unclouded hemisphere, cheers and exhilarates all who behold it: and, when it shines on the earth that has been refreshed with gentle showers, it causes the grass, and every herb, to spring forth almost visibly before our eyes. And is it not thus with all who submit themselves to Christ? do not new prospects open to them, and, with their more enlarged views, are they not revived with proportionable consolations? are they not gladdened with the light of his countenance? are they not sometimes almost overwhelmed with the brightness of his glory, so as to be transported with joy unspeakable? Yes; to them there is an unclouded sky, except as far as sin prevails: if they were as perfectly obedient to the will of Christ as the saints in heaven are, they would possess a very heaven upon earth. If they have any intermission of their joy, it is not owing to any strictness in his *laws*, or any defect in his *administration*, but to their own indwelling lusts and corruptions.

What an astonishing effect too does the light of his countenance produce with respect to fruitfulness in good works! let the soul, watered with showers of divine grace, and softened with the tears of penitence and contrition, once feel the genial influence of his rays, and there will be an instantaneous change in its whole state: "it will revive as the corn, and grow as the vine; and the scent thereof will be as the wine of Lebanon^g." Every holy affection will be called forth into exercise; and every fruit of righteousness abound to the glory of God.

^g Hos. xiv. 7.

Such are the effects which the Psalmist elsewhere ascribes to Christ's government^h; and such, in all ages, have invariably resulted from itⁱ.]

INFER—

1. How earnestly should we desire the universal establishment of Christ's kingdom !

[Little do men consider the import of that petition, "Thy kingdom come." In uttering this prayer, we desire that our whole souls, and the souls of all mankind, may be subjected to Christ. And truly this event would restore the golden age of paradise. Ungodly men indeed would persuade us, that an unlimited submission to Christ would be an occasion of melancholy, and a source of misery. But if once they were to experience the effects of his government upon their own souls, they would learn, that obedience to him is the truest happiness of man. Let us then take upon us his light and easy yoke, as the only, and the certain means of finding rest unto our souls.]

2. What madness is it to continue in rebellion against Christ !

[It is not at our option whether Christ shall be our ruler or not; for "God has set him upon his holy hill of Zion," and in due season, will "put all his enemies under his feet." If we will not bow before the sceptre of his grace, he will "break us in pieces with a rod of iron." Shall we then provoke him to wrath, when we have so much to dread from his displeasure? No: rather let the truth which is here with such awful solemnity announced, be with all holy reverence received: yea, let us "kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and we perish from the way^k." Thus shall we now enjoy the felicity of his chosen; and, in the day when all his enemies shall be slain before him, we shall be made partners of his throne for evermore.]

^h Ps. lxxii. 2—7.

ⁱ Acts ii. 41—47.

^k Ps. ii. 1—12.

CCCXXVI.

THE COVENANT OF GRACE.

2 Sam. xxiii. 5. *Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire.*

IN all the trials and troubles of life, religion alone can afford us any effectual support. To this the

saints in all ages have fled for refuge, and in this they have found all the consolation they could desire. The latter days of David were a continual scene of domestic sorrows. The defilement of Tamar by her brother Amnon, the murder of Amnon by his brother Absalom, the rebellion and untimely death of Absalom, and the conspiracy and consequent destruction of Adonijah, all embittered his life: and God had foretold, that such afflictions should await him, as a punishment for the horrible sins he had committed in the matter of Uriah. David however was not without his consolations. Though he could not have the happiness of seeing his house walking in the ways of God, yet he had good reason to believe that God had accepted him; and in the view of the covenant which God had made with him, he could not but rejoice. We do not apprehend that this covenant related exclusively to the succession of his posterity upon the throne of Israel, or even to the advent of the Messiah from his loins: it can be no other than that covenant which God made with his own Son, and with us in him; for no other covenant corresponds with the description here given of it, nor could David speak of any other as all his salvation and all his desire. That covenant relates to the salvation of a ruined world by the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus.

The representation which David here gives us of it will lead us to shew,

I. The excellence of this covenant—

This is set forth in a striking view in the words before us. We notice,

1. Its duration—

[Long before man had fallen, God, who foresaw his fall, devised a plan for his recovery: and in this plan his co-equal, co-eternal Son concurred: “The council of peace was between them both,” says the Prophet^a. To this St. Paul alludes, when he says, that he was “in hope of eternal life, which God had promised before the world began^b.” To whom could that

^a Zech. vi. 13.

^b Tit. i. 2.

promise be made, but unto the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Representative of his Church and people? Some divines have called this the covenant of *Redemption*, as contra-distinguished from the covenant of *Grace*; the one being made with Christ only, and the other with man. But this appears not founded in Scripture. There is one covenant only; and that was made with Christ *personally*, and with him as *the federal Head and Representative* of his elect people: as made with him *personally*, it promised him a seed, if he would lay down his life for them^c; and as made with him *federally*, it promised salvation to all who should believe in him, and become members of his mystical body^d.

Now this covenant is “everlasting;” it has existed from the beginning, and shall exist to all eternity. No human being ever has been saved but by virtue of it; nor shall any child of man ever be admitted into heaven, but agreeably to its provisions. We say not that no person ever has been, or shall be, saved without *a distinct acquaintance* with it: for we believe that many heathens who never heard of it, and millions of children who have been incapable of understanding any thing about it, have been saved; but not a single soul has ever been accepted of God the Father, but as redeemed by the blood of his only-begotten Son. And perhaps we may say, that this circumstance gives to the glorified saints an advantage over angels themselves: for angels, though confirmed, we trust, in their happiness by the power of God, do not hold that happiness by so sure a tenure as the saints hold theirs: *they* cannot boast of holding it by the promise and oath of Jehovah; they cannot shew a covenant securing to them the everlasting possession of their inheritance, and that covenant confirmed and ratified with the blood of God’s only dear Son: but *we* can refer to such a covenant, as the sure ground of all our expectations, and as the pledge that nothing shall ever separate us from the enjoyment of our God^e.]

2. Its fulness—

[It may truly be said to be “ordered in all things.” There is not any thing that can conduce to our happiness either in this world or the next, that is not comprehended in it. Every thing is prepared for us both in a way of providence and of grace. All our comforts, and all our trials, are therein adjusted for our good. All earthly things are secured to us, as far as they are necessary^f; and even afflictions themselves are promised, as the appointed means of fitting us for the realms of bliss^g. Whatever grace we stand in need of, it shall be given

^c Isai. liii. 10, 11.

^d Gal. iii. 16, 17.

^e 2 Cor. i. 20.

^f Matt. vi. 33.

^g Jer. xxx. 11.

at such times, and in such a measure, as shall most display the glory of God. It is true that God *requires of us* many things, as repentance, faith, and holiness; but it is equally true that he *promises* all these things *to us*: he has “exalted his own Son to *give us* repentance^h,” he also *gives us* to believe in Christⁱ; and he promises that he will, by the influence of his Spirit, *cause us* to walk in his statutes, and to keep his judgments and do them^k. We cannot place ourselves in any situation wherein God has not given us promises, “exceeding great and precious promises,” suited to our necessities, and commensurate with our wants: nor is so small a thing as the falling of a hair of our head left to chance; it is all ordered by unerring wisdom: and though there may be some events which, separately and distinctly considered, may be regarded as evil, yet, collectively taken in all their bearings, they shall “all work together for our eternal good^l.”]

3. Its certainty—

[It is “sure” to every one who trusts in it. In this it differs widely from the covenant of works which was made with man in innocence: for *that* depending on the fidelity of the creature, was violated, and annulled: whereas *this*, depending altogether on the fidelity of God, who undertakes to *work in us* all that he *requires of us*, and who engages not only not to depart from us, but not to suffer us to depart from him^m, shall never fail in any one particular: “The mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but the covenant of my peace shall not be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on usⁿ.” True it is that, as under the Jewish dispensation many were not steadfast in *that* covenant, which was a *mixed*, and *national* covenant, so many who profess religion do really “make shipwreck of the faith^o,” but they have never truly embraced the covenant of which we are speaking: they have embraced it only in a partial way, looking for its blessings without duly considering its obligations: they have been more intent on salvation from punishment, than salvation from sin. “Had they been really of us,” says the Apostle, “they would no doubt have continued with us^p.” “The foundation of God standeth sure: the Lord knoweth them that are his. *But* let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity^q.” This being our indispensable duty, God promises and engages, “that sin shall not have dominion over us,

^h Acts v. 31.

ⁱ Phil. i. 29.

^k Ezek. xxxvi. 25—27.

^l Rom. viii. 28.

^m Jer. xxxii. 40.

ⁿ Isai. liv. 9, 10.

^o 1 Tim. i. 19.

^p 1 John ii. 19.

^q 2 Tim. ii. 19. *Kai* should here be translated *but*. Compare 1 Cor. xii. 5. and xvi. 12. and 2 Tim. iii. 11. in the Greek.

because we are not under the law, but under grace^r:" and we know that "He is faithful who hath called us, who also will do it^s:" and this very circumstance of its being an article in God's covenant, a blessing to be gratuitously conferred by him, and freely received by us, this, I say, it is, which makes "the promise *sure* to all the seed^t."]

When once we view this covenant aright we shall see immediately,

II. The regard which it deserves—

We should not regard it merely as an object of curious research, or even of grateful admiration; but should make it,

1. The ground of all our hopes—

[Every other method of acceptance should be renounced; and this should be deliberately and cordially embraced" ——— We should contemplate every offer of mercy, every communication of grace, every mean of salvation as originating in the eternal counsels of Heaven: every thing should be traced up to the love of God the Father, and to the plans arranged by the sacred Three, for the magnifying of the divine perfections in the salvation of man ——— Even the atonement itself must be considered as deriving all its efficacy from this covenant: for, if God the Father had not consented to accept his Son as a surety for us, and to regard his death as an atonement for our sin, however honourable to Christ his mediation for us might be, it would not have been available for our salvation. We should get such a distinct view of this covenant as David had; of its duration, (from everlasting to everlasting;) its fulness, its certainty; and then should say of it as he did, "THIS is all my salvation;" except in *this*, I have no more hope than the fallen angels: but through the provision which *this* has made for me, I scarcely envy the angels who never fell: for "I know in whom I have believed, that He is able to keep that which I have committed to him^x:" and "I am confident that he who hath begun a good work in me will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ^y."]

2. The source of all our joys—

[Whatever comforts we may possess in this world, we should derive our chief happiness from *this*: *this* should be

^r Rom. vi. 14.

^s 1 Thess. v. 23, 24. Mark the connexion of these two verses.

^t Rom. iv. 16.

^u 2 Tim. i. 9. The two members of this sentence may be greatly enlarged.

^x 2 Tim. iv. 8.

^y 2 Tim. i. 12.

“all our desire,” or, as the word imports, all our *delight* — — — To this also we should have recourse in every season of affliction. David betook himself to it under all his domestic troubles, and in the near prospect of eternity. “His house, alas! was not so with God,” as he could wish. And how many are there who have great trials in their families! some from their unkindness, and others from their removal by death^z — — — Let every one that is so circumstanced learn from David where to flee for comfort: let him contemplate the riches of divine grace as exhibited in the covenant, and the blessedness of having an interest in it, and he will soon forget his sorrows, and have a heart overflowing with the most exalted joy — — — If, in addition to other troubles, we are lying upon the bed of death, we may well, like David, seek comfort in this covenant, and make “the last words of David^a” our last words also. What can so effectually remove the sting of death, as to behold a covenant-God in Christ Jesus, engaged to “keep him unto the end,” and to receive him to an everlasting enjoyment of his presence and glory? — — — Study then the wonders of this covenant, that they may be familiar to your minds in a time of health; and so shall they fill you with unutterable peace and joy, when every other refuge shall fail, and your soul be summoned into the presence of its God.]

^z This may be amplified so as to apply to many cases which may greatly interest the feelings of an audience. ^a ver. 1.

CCCXXVII.

DAVID'S DESIRE FOR THE WATER OF THE WELL OF BETHLEHEM.

2 Sam. xxiii. 15—17. *And David longed, and said, Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate! And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Beth-lehem, that was by the gate, and took it, and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord. And he said, Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this: is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives? therefore he would not drink it.*

THE best of men are liable to err: but in this they differ widely from the ungodly, that they are glad, as soon as they find out their error, to have it rectified. David inconsiderately expressed a wish for some water out of the well of Bethlehem; but when he saw what his inconsiderateness had occasioned, and especially

what *might* have arisen from it, he was grieved at himself for what he had done, and rejected with abhorrence the gratification which he had before desired.

This anecdote respecting him may appear unworthy of a distinct consideration: but it is in reality very instructive. Let us consider,

I. This wish of David's—

To view it aright, we must notice it,

1. As foolishly indulged—

[That water was not necessary to him; for his army was not at all reduced to straits for want of water: and by the circumstance of its being in the possession of his enemies, it was unattainable, unless his enemies should be first subdued. To wish for it therefore merely to gratify his appetite, was foolish; and to express that wish to others was wrong. But in him we see a picture of human nature in general: all are wishing for something which they do not possess, though it be neither necessary to their welfare, nor easy to be attained. “Ye desire and have not,” is the account given of men by the voice of inspiration^a; and it characterizes all from early childhood, till age or infirmity has cured the disease — — — This tendency of our minds is decidedly sinful, inasmuch as it argues discontent with the lot assigned us by Providence, and too high an estimation of the things of time and sense^b. God, and heavenly things, may be desired with the utmost intenseness of our souls^c: but earthly things, whatever they may be, are no further to be desired than as God may be enjoyed in them, or glorified by them^d: and, as David in this wish had respect to nothing but mere personal gratification, he so far acted in a way unworthy of his high character.]

2. As rashly countenanced—

[Three of his most distinguished warriors determined, if possible, to gratify his desire; and, of their own accord, without any order from him, cut their way through the Philistine army, drew the water, and brought it to him. This was rash and presumptuous in the extreme. Had they been moved to it by God, as David was to go against Goliath with a sling and a stone, or as Jonathan was to climb up a rock, and, unsupported by any one but his armour-bearer, to attack a Philistine garrison, they would have acted right; because in executing the divine will they might expect the divine protection: but to go on such an errand without any command

^a Jam. iv. 2. See the Greek.

^b Numb. xi. 4, 5.

^c Ps. xlii. 1, 2. and lxiii. 1.

^d Ps. lxxiii. 25.

either from God or man, was to expose themselves unnecessarily to the utmost peril, and in reality to tempt God. Doubtless a contempt of danger is a great virtue in a soldier; but it may be unduly exercised: and we are persuaded that, before men put their lives in jeopardy, they should inquire, whether the occasion be sufficiently important to demand it, or, at least, whether they be called to it in the way of duty.]

3. As piously suppressed—

[When the water was brought to him, he refused to drink of it; and, with a mixture of shame and gratitude, poured it out as a drink-offering unto the Lord. To him it appeared, that the drinking of it would be like drinking the blood of his most faithful servants: and therefore, much as he had desired it before, he would on no account gratify his appetite at such an expense. This argued true love to those who had served him at so great a risk, and genuine piety towards God, whose merciful kindness he thus gratefully acknowledged. But how little of such self-denial is there in the world! how few, when a desired gratification is within their reach, will abstain from the indulgence of it, from the consideration of the evils which may accrue to the object that administers to their delight! — — If however we condemn David for cherishing such a wish, we cannot but applaud the forbearance he exercised in reference to it, when it was obtained.]

Let us now contemplate,

II. The lessons to be learned from it—

1. How strong a principle is love!

[Love dictated the measure which these soldiers took: whilst therefore we disapprove the act, we must admire the principle from which it proceeded. It is a principle “strong as death;” nor can “many waters quench it.” It is a principle also by which, not soldiers only, but persons in every situation and relation of life should be actuated: and how happy would it be for the world, if it operated universally in its full extent! How happy if, in our social and domestic circles, the only contest was, who should shew most love, and exert himself in the most self-denying way for the good of others! This is the spirit which God himself approves^e; and the Lord grant it may increase and abound amongst us more and more^f!]

2. How should we delight to exercise love towards our Lord Jesus Christ in particular!

[He is “the Captain of our salvation,” and “of all the

^e Heb. x. 24.

^f 1 Thess. iii. 12.

hosts of Israel:" and he has opened to us access to the waters of life, "of which whosoever drinketh shall never thirst^g." Moreover, to effect this, he has not merely jeopardized his life, but actually laid down his life: knowing assuredly all the sufferings he must endure in order to procure these blessings for us, he voluntarily undertook our cause, and never drew back, till he could say, "It is finished." Is He not then worthy to be loved by *us*? Yea, should there be any bounds to our love to him? Should we not be "willing to be bound, or even to die, for his sake?" Surely, whatever dangers we may be encompassed with, we should say, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto me," so that I may but fulfil his will, and promote his glory.]

3. With what grief and indignation should we mortify every sinful desire!

[When once we see what sin has done, we shall see what it merits at our hands. It was to counteract the effects of sin, that Jesus shed his blood. Shall we then indulge sin of any kind? However gratifying it may be to our feelings, should we not say, like David in our text, "Is not this the blood of God's only dear Son, even of my best Friend, who laid down his life for me? I will not drink it; I will sacrifice my every lust unto the Lord." Ah, Brethren! look at sin in this view: and if it be dear to you as a right eye, or apparently as necessary as a right hand, do not hesitate one moment to cast it from you with abhorrence; humbling yourselves for having ever conceived a desire after it, and adoring your God that it has not long since involved you in everlasting death and misery.]

^g John iv. 10, 13, 14.

CCCXXVIII.

DAVID NUMBERING THE PEOPLE.

2 Sam. xxiv. 11—15. *When David was up in the morning, the word of the Lord came unto the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, Go and say unto David, Thus saith the Lord, I offer thee three things; choose thee one of them, that I may do it unto thee. So Gad came to David, and told him, and said unto him, Shall seven years of famine come unto thee in thy land? or wilt thou flee three months before thine enemies, while they pursue thee? or that there be three days' pestilence in thy land? Now advise, and see what answer I shall return to him that sent me. And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the Lord;*

for his mercies are great : and let me not fall into the hand of man. So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed : and there died of the people from Dan even to Beer-sheba seventy thousand men.

SINS, punishments, humiliations, forgivenesses, succeed each other in a melancholy train throughout the Bible, even as clouds after rain in the material world. Even the most pious characters have their faults and blemishes, which call forth the divine chastisements on themselves and others. We have here an account of David numbering the people, and bringing a heavy judgment on the whole land. The history will lead us to notice,

I. The severity of God in punishing sin—

The sin which David committed was exceeding great—

[It had been enjoined by God, that the people never should be numbered without a half shekel being collected from every one of them as a tribute to the Lord, or, as it is called, “a ransom for his soul,” “*that there might be no plague amongst them when they were numbered*”^a.] Now as David never once mentioned this in the order that was given, and as this collection was not made in all the time that the census was taking, it seems that David greatly transgressed in this particular, and *that the plague was sent among them on this account*. But it is manifest that David was actuated by *pride*, in wishing to know the extent of the population he governed; and that he was indulging *confidence in an arm of flesh*, instead of trusting in God only. That he was faulty in these particulars was visible even to so wicked a man as Joab, who expostulated with him on the subject, and warned him that he was bringing guilt and punishment upon the whole nation^b. Now of all sins, these are the most hateful in the sight of God^c: and to persist in them so long, in opposition to such plain warnings as were delivered to him, was a very grievous offence.]

The punishment inflicted for it was proportionably severe—

[God sent a prophet to him, to offer him a choice of three judgments, of seven^d years of famine, or three months of unsuc-

^a Exod. xxx. 12—14. ^b 1 Chron. xxi. 3. ^c Jer. xvii. 5, 6.

^d “Seven years of famine” should probably be read “three,” that being the number annexed to the other judgments, and it being expressly so represented in the parallel account. See 1 Chron. xxi. 12.

cessful warfare, or three days of pestilence: a painful choice indeed! but David wisely preferred the falling into the hands of God, and not into the hands of man. The election being made, the judgment was immediately executed: and no less than seventy thousand men were slain by a destroying angel, before the expiration of the appointed time^e. What now shall we think of *sin*? Is it so light a matter as the generality of men imagine? and are not they justly called “fools” who “make a mock at it?” The sins of the heart are considered as altogether venial: pride and self-confidence are scarcely numbered in the catalogue of sins: but behold in what light they are viewed by an holy God! O that we might learn, if not from God’s declarations, at least from his judgments, what an awful thing sin is, and with what tremendous punishment it will be visited!]

Next let us view,

II. The goodness of God in pardoning sin—

David and the elders of Israel humbled themselves before God—

[David had expressed, and that too in very energetic language, his shame and sorrow on account of his transgression: but God determined to punish his iniquity. On the execution of vengeance upon the land, the elders of Israel united with him in the deepest humiliation^f: and David, when he saw the angel standing over Jerusalem with a drawn sword in his hand, pleaded most earnestly with God, that the punishment might fall on him who had been the author of the sin, and not on the people who were innocent^g. This was a mark of true contrition. When the soul is not really abased before God, it will rather extenuate its guilt, or cast the blame upon others^h; but when it has a just sense of its guilt, it will be willing to take shame to itself to the utmost extent of its deserts: and such a spirit will never be exercised in vain.]

Now therefore God removed the punishment, and pardoned the iniquity—

[Instantly did God command the angel to “stay his hand:” but at the same time a command was given to build an altar there, and to offer sacrifices to the offended Majesty of heaven. God from the beginning had honoured his own

^e Some have taken occasion from this expression, which they say may signify the evening, to represent the pestilence as lasting only to the evening sacrifice of the same day, that is, only nine hours in all: but there is strong internal evidence in the history that it continued the whole three days.

^f 1 Chron. xxi. 16. ^g 1 Chron. xxi. 17. ^h 1 Sam. xv. 20, 21.

institutions, and had taken all fit occasions of directing penitents to that great Sacrifice whereby alone the sins of men could be forgiven: and now he stopped the angel on the very spot where he had, many centuries before, arrested Abraham's hand when sacrificing his son; and where, but a short time after, the temple itself was built; that temple in which all the sacrifices were offered, and in the services of which the death of Christ was so abundantly prefiguredⁱ. Nay, on this occasion God was pleased to put peculiar honour on the sacrifice, in that he sent fire from heaven to consume it^k. Thus did he point out to David and to all Israel, thus also has he shewn to the whole world, that though penitence and prayer are indispensable requisites in those that shall be pardoned, it is the sacrifice of Christ only that avails for our acceptance with God — — —]

The history very particularly leads us to notice, in the next place,

III. The effect which the sins of individuals produce on the community—

It was in reality for *Israel's* sin that this punishment was inflicted—

[“The anger of God, we are told, was kindled against *Israel*,” and on this account “he moved David against them, to say, Go, number Israel and Judah^l.” In the parallel place we are told, that “Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel^m.” We are not to suppose that God himself actually tempted David; for we are expressly told, that “he doth not tempt any manⁿ,” but he permitted Satan to tempt him; and we well know, that if God's restraining hand be removed, Satan will prevail against the strongest of men, and “sift them as wheat.” But when David had thus voluntarily sinned, both he and his people were punished for their iniquity. In a word, for *Israel's* sin *he* was left, and for *his* sin *they* were *punished*. In this dispensation there was nothing unworthy of the divine character; for both David and Israel justly deserved punishment, and might have been visited with God's judgments independently of this sin: but by this dispensation God would shew us, that, *in this world*, communities should be dealt with as one body; the head being afflicted for the members, and the members for the head: that so all may be led to the utmost of their power to consult the welfare of the whole.]

Let us therefore be on our guard, lest we be

ⁱ 2 Chron. iii. 1.

^k 1 Chron. xxi. 26.

^l ver. 1.

^m 1 Chron. xxi. 1.

ⁿ Jam. i. 13.

instrumental to the destruction, rather than to the welfare, of each other—

[What evil may not a head of a family bring on the members; a ruler on his subjects; a minister on his people! or what may not *they* suffer through the misconduct of those over whom they are placed! Let this connexion be duly considered; and, whatever station *we* are called to fill, let us determine, through grace, that we will perform the duties of it, every joint supplying its utmost aid for the edification of the whole body°. And let us be more ready to take blame to ourselves, than to cast it on others. More particularly, let us watch and pray, that we enter not into temptation; and that Satan may not be permitted to get advantage against us. Thus shall we be blessings to the community, and to the Church of God; and shall through the great Sacrifice be accepted of God in the eternal world.]

° Eph. iv. 16.

1 KINGS.

CCCXXIX.

SOLOMON PUTS SHIMEI TO DEATH.

1 Kings ii. 44. *The Lord shall return thy wickedness upon thine own head.*

FEW parts of Scripture have given more occasion for the cavils of infidels, than that which relates the close of David's life, and the commencement of Solomon's reign. Those who delight in disparaging the characters of all the most exalted saints, represent David as dying under the influence of a vindictive spirit; and Solomon as beginning his reign with most flagrant acts of cruelty. But both the one and the other of these saints may be vindicated in what they did; yea rather their conduct must be highly approved, if only we view it in a proper light. Some indeed have vindicated David's advice, by saying, that though he had sworn to Shimei that he should not be put to death for his offence, Solomon was not bound by his oath. But I answer, that David was as much bound by his oath not to procure the death of Shimei through the instrumentality of another, as he was not to put him to death with his own hand. The true way of vindicating both David and Solomon in reference to all the seeming acts of severity which were recommended by the one and executed by the other, is by viewing them as acts of retributive justice. It is in that light that Solomon himself speaks of the execution of Shimei; and he even represents the punishment as inflicted not by himself only, but by God also.

In considering the subject of retributive justice, we shall shew,

I. How it *should be* exercised by *men*—

By men in their individual capacity, it should not be exercised at all—

[We are forbidden to think of retaliating an injury, or of avenging ourselves at all^a. Yea rather we are taught patiently to bear injuries^b; and tenderly to requite them with acts of kindness^c; and to persist in this conduct till we have melted our adversaries into shame, and overcome them with love^d — — — Our blessed Lord, who died for his very murderers, has “left us an example that we should follow his steps^e” — — —]

But, as public men, we may, and must execute justice on those who transgress the laws—

[Magistrates are invested with authority by God himself for this very end: and they are “not to bear the sword in vain:” they are to be a terror to evil-doers, as well as a protection to those who do well.

Now this throws the true light on the advice which David gave to Solomon at the close of his life, and on the conduct which Solomon maintained. David was not actuated by revenge when he advised Solomon to put Joab to death, and to take the first opportunity of visiting on the head of Shimei the sins of which he had been guilty. David knew the characters of both: he knew that Joab would not fail to advance Adonijah to the throne, if ever it should be in his power; and that Shimei still cleaved to the house of Saul as much as ever, and would use all his influence in concert with Joab to dethrone Solomon: David therefore advised him to remove as soon as possible those who would destroy the peace and prosperity of his kingdom. As for Joab, he ought to have been put to death long ago, for the murders he had committed; and David had brought guilt on himself and the whole nation by suffering him to live: and therefore, now that there was no prospect of the people rising in favour of Joab, he recommended that justice should be executed upon him. That David was actuated by no bad spirit in this advice, appears from the charge he gave Solomon at the same time to walk in the strictest observance of God's commands. We may justly say therefore that the advice was precisely such as a dying monarch ought to have given to a young man, who was just ready to ascend the throne. In like manner Solomon was justified in all the steps he took to

^a Prov. xxiv. 29.

^b Matt. v. 38, 41.

^c Matt. v. 44.

^d Rom. xii. 19—21.

^e 1 Pet. ii. 21—24.

establish his kingdom. He had pardoned Adonijah for his conspiracy against him, on the express condition that he should act the part of a good and loyal subject: but seeing speedily his restless ambition, and that the request to have Abishag for his wife was but a device to increase his influence in the state, and to pave the way for his attainment of the throne, he very properly recalled the promise he had made to Bathsheba respecting him (which by no construction whatever could be supposed to extend to such a case as that); and inflicted on him that punishment which his treasonable intentions deserved.

In Adonijah's late conspiracy Abiathar and Joab had joined, though they all knew that the appointment of Solomon to the throne was not from any partiality in David, but from God himself. Solomon therefore now thrust out Abiathar from the priesthood, and banished him to his native town. This was a mild sentence, in consideration of the services he had rendered unto David in his afflictions.

Joab now saw that justice was coming home to him also: and he fled to the altar, hoping to find the same protection there that Adonijah had found before him: but he was a murderer; and God had expressly ordered that his altar should be no sanctuary for such persons^f: accordingly Solomon ordered that, if he would not come from thence, he should be slain there; that so he might the more manifestly appear to be sacrificed to the justice of his God.

The person spoken of in our text is Shimei, who cursed David in the day of his calamity; but had received from David a free pardon for his offence. This was a very powerful man; for no less than a thousand men attended him when he came to ask pardon: and he retained all his former enmity to David, though he had not been able to manifest it with effect. Him therefore Solomon also pardoned, on condition that he should never go out of the city of Jerusalem, where he might be constantly under the eye of the government. This condition he thankfully accepted: but after three years he violated it, and thus forfeited his life, which Solomon therefore, agreeably to the advice given him by David, required at his hands.

Now, whilst we acknowledge that these acts of retributive justice would have been bad, if they had proceeded from a vindictive spirit, we must affirm that they were both just and necessary, in order to prevent disturbances in the state, and to secure the welfare of the whole nation.]

Such is the way in which retributive justice should be exercised by man. Let us now consider,

^f Exod. xxi. 14.

II. How it *will be* exercised by God—

God is the Sovereign of the universe: and though he bears long with his rebellious subjects, he often executes vengeance upon them in this world, as preparatory to the judgments he will inflict upon them in the world to come. In a peculiar manner, as our text expresses it, “he returns their wickedness upon their own head,”

1. Here—

[Sometimes indeed sinners are left, as it were, wholly to themselves in this world: but even this is a mark of God’s displeasure against them: “Ephraim,” says he, “is joined to idols; let him alone^g.” They harden themselves against him, and he gives them up to judicial hardness, as he did Pharaoh of old^h. “They will not believe his word, that they may be saved; and he gives them up to believe their own lie, that they may be damnedⁱ.” “They will not hear him when he speaks to them; and he turns a deaf ear to them, when in the day of their calamity they cry to him;” thus leaving them to be “filled with their own devices^k.”

But in temporal judgments he often marks his indignation against them, and shews them their sin in their punishment. How strikingly was this shewn in the judgments inflicted on Adoni-bezek¹! and how awfully was David made to behold his crimes in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah, in the ravishment of Tamar by his son Amnon, in the defilement of all his concubines by his son Absalom, and in the murder of Amnon by Absalom! Thus we see now that multitudes are punished in a way so suited to their crimes, that they may even read their crimes in their punishment: their wicked examples are imitated by their children; and they are made to feel the bitterness of their own sins from the sins and calamities of their dearest relatives.

In all such instances we may behold the retributive justice of God. And though it would not be right for us to be hasty in putting this construction on the judgments inflicted upon others, we shall do well to examine how far our own trials may be so interpreted; and to take occasion from our afflictions to put away the sins which they are intended to chastise.]

2. Hereafter—

[Whether God overlook or punish our sins in this world, he will proceed according to strict equity against us in the world to

^g Hos. iv. 17.

^h Isai. vi. 9, 10.

ⁱ 2 Thess. ii. 10—12.

^k Prov. i. 24—31.

¹ Judg. i. 6, 7.

come. The day of judgment is emphatically called, "the day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God." Then shall every thing be taken into consideration, either to extenuate or aggravate our crimes: "The servant that knew his lord's will and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes; whilst the more ignorant transgressor shall be beaten with few." Every one's "end will be according to his works:" he will be weighed in a perfect balance, and will "receive according to that he hath done in the body, whether it be good or evil." His views, his motives, his principles will all be judged: "God will make manifest the counsels of his heart:" and every one shall be constrained to confess that his doom is just — — —]

Let us then LEARN from this subject,

1. To be candid in judging others—

[A person looking only superficially at this history would be ready to condemn both David and Solomon for their conduct: but when we view their situation, and enter properly into their motives, we are constrained to approve it. Thus it must often happen. We see an action, but we do not exactly enter into all the circumstances that gave it birth: and therefore we judge erroneously respecting it. But we should leave all judgment to the Lord, who alone is able to decide on the motives and principles from which it springs. We must indeed of necessity pass judgment in many cases, where the crimes are so glaring that they cannot possibly be mistaken: but where there is the least ground for favourable interpretation, we should exercise that "charity which hopeth all things and believeth all things." That rule cannot be too strictly attended to, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."]

2. To be severe in judging ourselves—

[Here we are in little danger of excess. A person of a gloomy disposition may indeed write bitter things against himself without occasion; but, in general, self-love will lead us rather to extenuate every thing that is amiss, and to justify many things which God will condemn. Let us remember, therefore, that God will not accommodate his judgment to ours: "he will judge righteous judgment:" "to him all things are naked and open:" "his eyes are as a flame of fire," that will search the inmost recesses of the heart, and try every disposition of the mind. Let us endeavour to bear in mind, that his eye is over us; and let us strive to walk as in his immediate presence. And let our every act and word and thought be regulated by the consideration, that the hour is quickly coming, when every the minutest circumstance of our lives will be brought to light, and our eternal state be fixed by a righteous and unerring God.]

CCCCXX.

SOLOMON'S CHOICE.

1 Kings iii. 11—13. *And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment: behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart, so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days.*

SUCH is the condescension of Almighty God, that he not only conversed familiarly with man in a state of innocence, but even in his fallen state has talked with him as a man talketh with his friend. So free was the intercourse which he maintained with Abraham, that that patriarch was “called the friend of God.” With Solomon too his communications were most familiar, as the instance recorded in our text will evince. Solomon, after he was seated on the throne of David his father, offered a thousand burnt-offerings at Gibeon, where God’s principal altar was, previous to the building of the temple. After that pious work was performed, God visited him, and revealed himself to him in a dream or vision, and bade him ask any blessing that he chose; assuring him that it should certainly be granted. Solomon accepted the offer, and made known to God the request contained in our text.

Let us consider,

I. The choice of Solomon—

His request was for a more abundant measure of wisdom—

[In this request, he desired *intellectual* wisdom, whereby he might be fitted for all the duties and services of his high station. He was conscious, that, without this, he should but ill discharge the office to which God in his providence had called him. He felt the awful responsibility attached to the

office of a monarch; and he longed to approve himself both able and faithful in the execution of his trust.

But it is evident that he desired *spiritual* wisdom also; for he wanted "to discern in all things between good and bad," which he could not do without a clear discovery of the Law, which is the only true test of good and evil.

Now this was a wise choice. He might, as God tells him, have asked for riches, or honour, or power over his enemies: but he felt that none of those things could make him happy, or render those happy who were committed to his care. Indeed we need only look at those who have been most famed for their conquests, and we shall find, that no acquisitions of wealth or territory could satisfy them; and that they have been no less a curse to the people they governed, than to those whom they endeavoured to subdue; since they sought only to gratify their own ambition at the expense of those, whose welfare they should have solely regarded. But without extending our views to them, we need only look within the narrow circle of our own acquaintance, and we shall see, that wisdom conduces more to the happiness of men, than all other things whatever. See the man that is enabled to conduct himself well in the most arduous affairs of life, how happy does he make all who are connected with him; especially, if he be endued with spiritual wisdom also, so as to have a spiritual discernment in every thing relating to God and man! What a light then shines around him; and what blessings does he communicate wherever he comes! Compare such an one with the great, the rich, the mighty, and he will be found far happier than them all.

This choice moreover was approved of God himself, who not only commended it as wise, but honoured it with a rich reward; giving him in a very abundant measure the blessing he desired^a, and bestowing on him also those minor blessings which he had forborne to ask.]

From this brief view of Solomon's choice we may easily collect,

II. The instruction to be gathered from it—

It clearly shews,

1. That an ability to discharge our duty aright is the most desirable of all blessings—

[In whatever line of life we be, this will be found a truth. Persons in higher life may, if truly gracious, do extensive good: but wealth and power are abused, so as rather to diminish than augment the happiness of those who are within the sphere of their influence. Besides, in many cases, wealth and power can

^a 1 Kings iv. 29—31.

do no good at all ; whereas wisdom is serviceable in every situation in which we can be placed ; nor is there a man existing who may not be benefited by the possessor of it. “ Wisdom,” we are told, “ is profitable to direct : ” and whilst it regulates the motions of others, it will enable a man to “ guide his own affairs with discretion,” and to “ walk wisely before God in a perfect way^b.”

Need I say from how many difficulties and evils it will keep a man ; or what peace and joy it will bring into the soul ? Truly, as in the want of this not all the world can give any permanent satisfaction, so, in the absence of all other things, this will afford the richest comfort and support. We may well therefore say, that nothing in the universe is to be compared to it^c. Would to God that the rich and great in every place made it, in the days of youth too, the one object of their pursuit !]

2. That it is the gift of God alone—

[Education will improve our talents ; but it will never confer solid wisdom : *that* “ cometh from above^d.” We may go to every creature in the universe, and they will all give us the same answer, “ It is not in me ; it is not in me^e.” The man famed for wisdom almost as much as Solomon himself^f, has directed us to God as the only true source of all wisdom^g. We must seek it therefore, not by study only, but by prayer ; for “ it is God that giveth wisdom ; and out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding^h.” If any man could have derived it from any other source, surely Solomon might ; seeing that he was naturally possessed of strong mental powers, and had the advantage of being instructed by the most pious and experienced of kings. But he felt that none but God could open the eyes of his understanding, or enrich him with that spiritual knowledge, which alone could qualify him for the discharge of his high office.]

3. That where a desire after it is supreme in the soul, God will signally honour and bless us—

[The desire after wisdom ought to be so predominant in the soul as to have no rival there : if it be not supremely coveted, the desire after it is not sincere. But where it is really sought as the supreme good, there God promises that he will grant it, yea and liberally too, if we come to him in faith, and ask it at his handsⁱ. To desire this is the best way of obtaining

^b Ps. ci. 2.

^c Prov. iii. 13—18.

^d Jam. i. 17.

^e See that eloquent passage, Job xxviii. 12—23.

^f Ezek. xxviii. 3.

^g Dan. ii. 20, 21.

^h Prov. ii. 1—6.

ⁱ Jam. i. 5. Eph. iii. 20.

other blessings in the measure that is good for us: for God promises, that, if we “seek spiritual blessings *first*, all other things shall be added unto us^k.” We are far from saying, that other things are not to be sought at all; we only say, that they must be regarded as altogether subordinate to spiritual blessings, and be valued only as they may be subservient to the advancing of God’s honour and the good of mankind. *In this view*, riches, honour, and power may be desired; but in comparison of true wisdom, they must be regarded only as the small dust upon the balance.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who are ambitious of earthly honours—

[Think but how speedily they will vanish, and you will raise your ambition to that which shall endure for ever^l — — —]

2. Those who desire the approbation of their God—

[God makes the same offer to you that he did to Solomon^m. Let your choice then be the same as his: and seek it with all the ardour and earnestness it deservesⁿ — — —]

^k Matt. vi. 33.

^l Ps. xc. 12.

^m John xiv. 13, 14. and xvi. 23, 24.

ⁿ Prov. iv. 5—7.

CCCXXI.

THE STILLNESS WITH WHICH THE TEMPLE WAS BUILT.

- 1 Kings vi. 7. *And the house, when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither: so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house while it was in building.*

NEVER was there upon the face of the globe a building, that in point of elegance or grandeur could be compared with the temple of Solomon. It had been the desire of David to erect it; but he was forbidden of God to do so, because he had been engaged in many wars, and had shed much blood. God however approved of his desire, and told him, that his son should have the honour which was denied to him. Nevertheless David began immediately to make preparations for the building; and Solomon in three years after he came to the throne was ready to begin the work; which in somewhat more than

seven years he was enabled to complete. There is, in the structure of this edifice, one circumstance so remarkable as to deserve very particular attention: the wood and stones were all prepared at a distance, and brought to the place perfectly fitted for the situation in which they were to stand: and with such unerring skill were they all framed, that, during the whole time of building the temple, there was no occasion for an axe or hammer to be used; and the whole structure was completed without the smallest noise. Now whoever considers the figurative nature of the Jewish dispensation must see, that such an extraordinary circumstance as this could not have happened from mere chance, or have occurred at all without some very important meaning. We doubt not but that it was intended by God to shadow forth some truths for the instruction of his Church in all ages. What these were, we cannot declare with certainty, because no inspired writer has specified them: but we apprehend that, whatever else this circumstance might intimate, it was particularly calculated to represent,

I. The perfection of God's designs—

[Every part of the edifice, and every vessel in it, was formed, as it were, in the mind of the Divine Architect, long before Solomon or David ever entertained the thought of executing such a work. Before Moses constructed the tabernacle, there was a model set before him by God, and he was ordered to make every thing according to the pattern shewn to him in the mount^a. A similar model was given by God to David, and shewn by him to Solomon, for the constructing of the temple^b: so that, as existing in the divine mind, the work was perfect before it was begun.

Now this shews us what is really the case with respect to every thing in the whole creation. As the creation itself was all formed in the divine purpose, though it occupied six successive days to complete it, so all things to the very end of time are present in the mind of God, having been ordained of him before the foundation of the world.

We are aware that to many this appears "an hard saying:" but it is "a true saying:" for how could so many things have

^a Exod. xxv. 40.

^b 1 Chron. xxviii. 11—13, 19.

been foretold by prophets in different and distant ages, if they had not been previously fixed in the purposes of God? Had there been any thing left to chance, some of these prophecies must have failed: but not even the minutest circumstance that has been predicted has ever failed: and this proves that God foresaw every thing that should ever come to pass; and that he foresaw it, not as probable, but as certain, and therefore certain, because he had ordained it. This is true respecting the vilest iniquities of men, no less than their greatest virtues. The whole treatment which our blessed Lord should meet with, was foreseen, and fore-ordained; though the agents were perfectly free in their actions, and were as much accountable to God as if nothing had been foreseen or fore-ordained^c. Nor is it only *unwittingly* that men have accomplished the divine purposes, but *against their will*: for Joseph's brethren were bent upon defeating the divine purposes, and yet actually accomplished them by the very means which they used to defeat them^d. There does indeed appear on some occasions a change of the divine purpose, as in the sparing of Nineveh, and in the prolonging of Hezekiah's life: but these were not changes in the divine *purpose*, but changes in the divine *dispensations*, agreeably to the purpose which had been previously formed in the mind of God.

If this doctrine were not true, God would not be a perfect Being. If any thing were left unfixed in the divine counsels, God could not be omniscient, but would become wiser by the events of every successive day. But can any one doubt whether God be omniscient or not? Surely, as St. James declares, "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world^e." To deny that God possesses the attribute of foreknowledge would be downright atheism: and to separate this attribute from his pre-ordination appears to me inconsistent and impracticable: nor do they who take refuge in this distinction find themselves at all better able to reconcile their doctrine with the freedom of man's will, and his responsibility for his conduct, than those who consider every thing as fore-ordained: and if they get rid of some difficulties, they involve themselves in more and greater than they avoid. In truth the language of Scripture is so strong respecting the divine decrees, that it is not possible to explain away many passages which relate to them^f. We acknowledge that the subject is deep, and far beyond the comprehension of man: we would therefore never speak of it but with the deepest reverence; nor ever without reminding our hearers, that it is with the divine *commands*, and not the divine *decrees*, that they have to do: it is

^c Acts ii. 23.^d Gen. xlv. 5. and l. 20.^e Acts xv. 18.^f Isai. xlvi. 9—11. Eph. i. 4, 5, 9, 11. and iii. 9, 11.

to *those*, and not to *these*, that they must look, as the rule of their actions. Still however we dare not deny that God is the Sovereign of the universe, who acts in all things "according to the counsel of his own will, and for the praise of the glory of his own grace^g:" and though we would by no means make this a prominent subject of our ministrations, yet we cannot but think that the occasional contemplation of this mystery is, as our Article expresses it, "full of pleasant, sweet, and unspeakable comfort."^j

Besides the perfection of God's designs, we see prefigured in this account,

II. The mode in which they are accomplished—

[The stillness with which the work of the temple proceeded intimated the still and silent way in which God carries on all his works, in *the world*, in *the Church*, and in *the souls of men*.

In *the world* we behold *men* carrying on *their* designs with great noise and tumult: but *God* is secretly and silently effecting *his own* purposes in the midst of all. Each of the four great empires, the Chaldean, Persian, Grecian, and Roman, successively rose on the ruins of that which preceded it; but none of the conquerors imagined whose counsels they were fulfilling, or whose instruments they were. Sennacherib boasted what victories he had gained; but he was only an axe or saw in the hand of Omnipotence^h. We shall have a perfect insight into this matter, if we look at the transactions which took place at the death of Christ: all parties followed the bent of their own hearts; but all accomplished with the utmost possible exactness the counsels of the Most High. God spake not to them by any audible voice to direct them; nor did he interpose in any visible way to guide their motions; but he presided in the storm, and overruled every disposition of their hearts for the accomplishment of his own eternal purposeⁱ. And it is a most consolatory thought, that, in all the great events which are now taking place in the world, "the counsel of God shall stand, and he will do all his will."

In *the Church* more especially does God carry on his work in this way. It was said of our Lord, that he should "not lift up his voice, nor cause it to be heard in the street^k:" he was to found his kingdom upon earth by a secret and invisible influence on the minds of men. His Apostles also were to go forth in dependence on that power, and, by their simple testimony, to convert the world unto him. In their attempts to

^g Eph. iii. 9, 11.

^h Isai. x. 5—7, 13—15. and xxxvii. 24—27.

ⁱ Acts iv. 27, 28.

^k Isai. xlii. 2.

subdue men to the obedience of faith, they were to use "no carnal weapons," but only such as should derive their efficacy from the grace of Christ¹; agreeably to that prophetic declaration, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts^m." Accordingly it was in this way that they prevailed over all the power and policy of earth and hell: and in this way will Christ continue to extend his conquests, "till all his enemies be put under his feet."

In the same way also does God accomplish his purposes in *the souls of men*. It is "not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, that God manifests himself to them, but in the still small voiceⁿ." The "seed sown in their hearts, groweth up, they know not how:" changes occur, which threaten to destroy it; but still it survives, and springs up, and brings forth fruit in its season. This operation is compared by our Lord to leaven, which continues to spread, till it has diffused itself through the whole mass. Thus does the grace of God silently, but progressively, renew the whole man, till we are changed into the very image of our God.]

From this subject we may LEARN,

1. What ought to be the character of our religion—

[Nothing is more common, and nothing more delusive, than a noisy, talkative religion. True religion is a humble, silent, retired thing, not affecting public notice, but rather wishing to approve itself to God^o. It is "not in saying, Lord, Lord, but in doing the will of our heavenly Father," that we shall find acceptance in the last day. Happy would it be, if many, who place all their religion in running about, and hearing sermons, and talking of the qualifications of ministers, and disputing about religious opinions, would attend to this hint, and endeavour to acquire more of that wisdom which evinces its divine origin by the excellence of its fruits^p!]

2. How we should judge of growth in grace—

[We would not undervalue the inward feelings of the heart: but, if not accompanied with more substantial evidences of piety, they are very deceitful. We should examine whether we are fitted for the duties of our respective stations. Of all the stones in the temple, there was not one which did not exactly suit its place: so will it be with us, if we have really been wrought upon by the Spirit of God: whether we be parents or children, masters or servants, magistrates or subjects, true grace will lead us to discharge our own duties aright. This is properly to act as members of a body, all fitly framed

¹ 2 Cor. x. 4, 5. ^m Zech. iv. 6.

ⁿ 1 Kings xix. 11, 12.

^o Ps. cxxxi. 2. with Jam. i. 26.

^p Jam. iii. 17.

together, all performing their proper functions, and all contributing to the good of the whole^a. That this idea is just, as arising from the present subject, is certain; for both St. Peter and St. Paul have placed the subject in this very point of view^r. Let us therefore particularly attend to it; and whilst we all profess to stand on the same foundation, and to be connected together by one Corner-stone, let us approve ourselves "*living stones*," by contributing as much as possible to the union, the beauty, the stability, and advancement of the whole building.]

3. How the dispensations of God will appear in the last day—

[A person who should have seen the materials of the temple in their rough state, would have formed no conception of their appearance after they were all fashioned by the workmen, and placed in the order appointed by the Divine Architect: but when the whole building was completed, it was the wonder of the world. Thus at present we have a very imperfect conception of the beauty of God's Church, or of his wisdom in all his various dispensations: but when his temple shall be complete in heaven, what a glorious edifice will it appear! How will each admire the way in which he was taken out of the quarry, and formed for the particular place that has been allotted him! Here men are apt to wonder, why they must have so many and so severe blows: but there none will think that he has had one stroke too much, or more than was absolutely necessary to fit him for his place: if by the most painful experiences he may have been formed for a more conspicuous station in the temple above, he will feel no regret at any thing he suffered in the body, but will adore the heavenly Workman, that condescended to use such means for his advancement. Let us then, if any thing perplex us now, remember that we see only in part; and be contented to wait till that day, when "God shall be glorified in all his saints, and be admired in all them that believe."]

^a Eph. iv. 15, 16.

^r 1 Pet. ii. 4, 5. Eph. ii. 20—22.

CCCXXXII.

GOOD INTENTIONS APPROVED.

1 Kings viii. 18. *Thou didst well that it was in thine heart.*

THE sovereignty of God is a subject from which the minds of men in general revolt. But this arises

from their considering it almost exclusively in relation to things which have an arbitrary and painful aspect. For instance, when "God says to Pharaoh, Even for this purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth;" St. Paul represents the proud heart of man as rising against it: "Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? for who hath resisted his will^a?" But, if we behold the same divine attribute as displayed in the appointment of Saul to the Apostleship, and the making of him "a chosen vessel to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles^b," we must surely acquiesce in the exercise of it, and adore our God as doing all things well. Now, in the passage before us we have a remarkable instance of divine sovereignty, in the refusal given to the wishes and desires of David, relative to the building of a temple for the Lord, and the transfer of that honour to David's son. On David's expression of his wish, the Prophet Nathan had encouraged him to carry it into effect. But God forbade it; and devolved the office of constructing the temple on David's son and successor: at the same time, however, commending David's purpose, and telling him, "Thou didst well that it was in thine heart^c."

Now, from this commendation, we may observe,

- I. That there is in the hearts of God's faithful servants more good than they are able to carry into effect—

In the hearts of the *ungodly* there is more *evil* than they can execute. If the restraints of Divine Providence and of human laws were withdrawn, so that men could perpetrate all that is in their hearts, this world would be little better than hell itself. Of the *godly*, on the contrary, it may be said, that there is more *good* in them than they can execute; not because Divine Providence or human laws impose

^a Rom. ix. 17—19.

^b Acts ix. 1, 15. with Gal. i. 15.

^c ver. 17—19. with 2 Sam. vii. 1—3, 12, 13.

restraints on them, (though, in some cases, that may be found true;) but because there is in the regenerate man a principle of evil as well as of good: "he has the flesh lusting against the spirit, as well as the spirit lusting against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other, so that he cannot do the things that he would^d."

There is in a regenerate man's heart much that he would gladly do *for himself*—

[Gladly would he extirpate from his soul all the remains of sin, and practise universal holiness—— But he finds himself utterly unable to do these things. The experience of St. Paul is common to every true believer: "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good, I find not; for the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. I find then a law, that when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the Law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death^e?" The saint, if he could accomplish his own wishes, would be "holy as God is holy," and "perfect even as his Father which is in heaven is perfect." But he feels imperfection cleaving to him in every thing, so that his very best actions need to be cleansed in the Redeemer's blood; yea, his very tears need to be washed, and his repentances to be repented of.]

Moreover, could the regenerate man have his heart's desire, he would walk continually in the light of God's countenance, and bask incessantly, as it were, in the beams of the Sun of Righteousness. But clouds frequently arise, to intercept his views of God, and to abate the joy with which, for a season, he has been favoured. The disciples would gladly have built tabernacles on Mount Tabor, to protract their vision of the divine glory. But they must descend again into the plain, to renew their conflicts with sin and Satan, and to finish the work which had been given them to do^f. And similar alternations of light and darkness, ease and conflict, joy and sorrow, are the portion of every saint, whilst in this vale of tears.]

There is much, also, that the regenerate man would gladly do *for the world around him*—

^d Gal. v. 17.

^e Rom. vii. 18—24.

^f Luke ix. 33, 34.

[Where is there a servant of God who would not, if it were possible, extend the blessings he enjoys to every child of man? Where is there a real saint that does not attempt this, so far as his influence extends? Is the very first petition which our Lord has commanded us to offer at the throne of grace, that "God's name may be hallowed;" and does not the real saint endeavour to carry this into effect, both in his own soul, and in the souls of those around him? Does he further pray, "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven;" and does he not long to see these things effected? He says from his heart, "O that the wickedness of the wicked might come to an end!" yea, he prays with David, "Let the whole earth be filled with the Redeemer's glory. Amen, and Amen^g." But how little of this is he able to accomplish! Even ministers, who "labour most assiduously, and for many years, in the blessed work of bringing souls to God, how universally are they constrained to adopt the prophet's complaint, and to say, "Who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The parent for his children, and the children for their parents, have but too much reason to acknowledge, that "whoever may plant or water, it is God alone who can give the increase."]

It is a comfort to them, however, to know,

II. That not the smallest good that is in them shall pass unnoticed, or unrewarded, by their God—

God inspects the inmost recesses of the heart—

[So he himself declares: "I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them^h." To the same effect, also, it is said by an inspired Apostle: "All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to doⁱ."]

And this he does in order to a future judgment—

["He will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ^k," and "will bring every secret thing into judgment, whether it be good or evil^l." It is in this way that the ungodly shall be judged: for the *motions* of anger or impurity, though not operating to the extent of the outward *act* of murder or adultery, will be construed as violations of the commandments which prohibit those particular sins, and be visited with the penalties due to such transgressions^m. So, also, the good desires of men shall be rewarded, though, from circumstances, they were never carried into full effect. Young Abijah had "in his heart some good thing towards the Lord God of Israel,"

^g Ps. lxxii. 19.

^h Ezek. xi. 5.

ⁱ Heb. iv. 13. See the Greek, τετραχλισμένα.

^k Rom. ii. 16.

^l Eccl. xii. 14.

^m Matt. v. 22, 28.

and it was not overlookedⁿ. And not those only who “*spake* of God one with another,” shall be approved by him in the day of judgment, but those also who, without having embodied their thoughts in language, only “thought upon his name^o.” The look, the sigh, the groan, the tear, shall all be recorded by God in the book of his remembrance, or be treasured up in his vial: and all “the counsels of men’s hearts,” though never realized in act, shall be made manifest, to their honour; and every man, according as his inward dispositions have been, shall in that day “receive praise from God^p.”]

IMPROVEMENT—

1. In a way of caution—

[Certainly this subject should be entertained with great jealousy: for there is “a desire which *killeth*,” because it is not productive of suitable exertions^q. If a mere wish or desire would save us, who would ever perish? Even Balaam could say, “Let me die the death of the righteous; and let my last end be like his^r.” But David, though not permitted to build the temple, contributed to the amount of eighteen millions of our money towards it. In like manner must our desires operate to the extent of our ability: and, if we cannot do what we *would*, we must do what we *can*.]

2. In a way of encouragement—

[Men are often cast down because of their short-comings and defects. But they would do well to consider, that the more ardent their desire is to honour God, the more will they discern and lament their incapacity to fulfil the dictates of their hearts. Suppose, for a moment, that a man were to express himself satisfied with his attainments, what judgment would you form of him? You would surely set him down as a self-deceiving hypocrite^s. Distinguish between humiliation and despondency: the former is called for in our best estate: but to no sinner in the universe is the latter suitable; for “Christ is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by him.”]

ⁿ 1 Kings xiv. 13.

^o Mal. iii. 16, 17.

^p 1 Cor. iv. 5.

^q Prov. xxi. 25.

^r Numb. xxiii. 10.

^s See Phil. iii. 12—14.

CCCXXXIII.

FOR THE OPENING OF TRINITY CHURCH AT CHELTENHAM.

1 Kings viii. 28—30. *Have thou respect unto the prayer of thy servant, and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to hearken unto the cry and to the prayer, which thy servant*

prayeth before thee to-day: that thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place of which thou hast said, My name shall be there: that thou mayest hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall make toward this place. And hearken thou to the supplication of thy servant, and of thy people Israel, when they shall pray toward this place: and hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place: and when thou hearest, forgive^a.

THE consecration of buildings erected for public worship obtained very early in the Church of Christ. We have the most authentic testimony that it was practised, to a very great extent, in the days of Constantine^b. Whether it existed in the first three centuries, we have no certain information: but when we consider for what a holy purpose they are set apart, we can have no doubt but that it is a service highly reasonable in itself, and truly acceptable unto God. We are not to suppose that the giving of the names of saints to churches was any mark of their being consecrated to *them*: it was to God alone that they were dedicated: and the names given to them were merely commemorative of their founder, or tokens of respect to the particular saint whose name they bore.

The idea of consecrating such edifices seems evidently to have been suggested by the dedication of Solomon's Temple, which exhibited altogether as glorious a scene as ever was beheld on earth. On that occasion, the king himself, a paragon of wisdom, and the greatest monarch of his day, bowed his knees before God in the sight of all the congregation of Israel, and, with up-lifted eyes and out-stretched hands, implored the favour of his God. To this prayer was vouchsafed an answer which filled all the spectators with the deepest awe: for fire came down from heaven, in the sight of all, to consume the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord so filled the temple,

^a The Author being taken ill at Cheltenham at the time that this Discourse was to have been preached, it was not delivered according to his intention.

^b Eusebiu mentions it with peculiar satisfaction. See "Bingham's Antiquities of the Church," Book viii. ch. 9. sec. 2.

that the priests could no longer continue their ministrations there^c.

But that to which I would more particularly call your attention at this time is, the prayer which Solomon offered, and which brought down so signal a blessing upon them all. It affords a noble specimen of man's intercourse with his Maker; and shews us,

- I. What we may hope for in God's house of prayer; and,
- II. How we may secure every blessing which our souls can desire.
- I. Let me state what we may confidently hope for in God's house of prayer—

Whatever there may be in this history that should be limited to that particular occasion, I think we may at least gather this instruction from it, that, whenever we draw nigh to God in the public services of his Church, we may expect these two things; namely, *His gracious presence to receive our prayers*, and *His merciful acceptance to forgive our sins*.

That there is great caution to be used in deducing general conclusions from particular premises, I readily acknowledge. But such conclusions are drawn by the inspired writers: for, from a particular promise made to Joshua, it is inferred, that all true believers, of whatever age or nation, may assure themselves of effectual aid from God; and, in the confident expectation of it, may hurl defiance at all the enemies of their salvation. The same general inference, I think, may well be drawn from God's gracious answer to this prayer of Solomon. Doubtless, a suppliant, in his secret chamber, shall find favour with God: for "God never says to any, Seek ye my face in vain." But, in public, when presenting his petitions in concert with others, the suppliant has a double assurance that he shall be heard: for God has especially promised, that "where two or three are gathered together in his name, he will be in the midst of them;" and that

^c 2 Chron. vii. 1, 2.

“whatever such persons, so associated, have agreed to ask, it shall be granted unto them.” I well know, that persons may very easily and very materially err in relation to the subject of answers to prayer; and that to expect fire to descend from heaven, as on that occasion, or a visible manifestation of God’s glory before our eyes, would be the height of enthusiasm. But still there are ways in which God *may* manifest his acceptance of our prayers, and in which he *will* manifest it: what else can be meant by that promise, “It shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear^d?” and again, “Thou shalt call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am^e?” The whole Scriptures attest, that, “if we draw nigh to God, he will draw nigh to us;” and that “he will manifest himself unto us, as he does not unto the world;” yea, that “he will come unto us, and make his abode with us:” and, I think there is not in the universe a person who has sought after God with humble, fervent, and believing prayer, but will acknowledge, that God does fulfil his promises, “satisfying the hungry soul, and replenishing the sorrowful” with the richest consolations of his Spirit.

This, then, we *may* expect, and this we *should* expect, in God’s house of prayer: nor should we ever be satisfied, if we have not a sensible access to God in prayer, and a well-founded hope that he has heard the petitions which we have presented before him.

But I have also observed, that we may hope for the actual forgiveness of our sins in answer to our prayer. And, in truth, if we obtain not this, we pray to little purpose. In drawing nigh to God, this must be chiefly kept in view. We go as sinners, to obtain mercy at the hands of God. And in this respect, the Liturgy of our Church is admirably fitted for our use. The extemporaneous effusions that are used in other places bear no comparison with the formularies of our Church. In truth, our churches themselves are,

^d Isai. lxv. 24.^e Isai. lviii. 9.

not houses for preaching only, but, in a pre-eminent degree, what our Reformers designed them to be, and what God ordained his Temple of old to be, “houses of *prayer*.” And those who make light of the Prayers, and regard them only as a kind of decent prelude to the Sermon, shew that “they know not what spirit they are of:” since all the preaching in the universe will be of no use without prayer; whereas the souls of men will prosper if they abound in prayer, though they are less favoured as to the ministrations of sinful men. Let any one consult our Liturgy in this particular view. The Introductory Sentences all bear on this point, to shew us what sinners we are, and how much we stand in need of mercy, and how ready God is to receive returning penitents. But, as I shall have occasion to enter somewhat more fully into this point under my next head, I will wave all further mention of it now; observing only, that a congregation uniting fervently in the prayers of our Liturgy would afford as complete a picture of heaven as ever yet was beheld on earth: in spirit, there would be the most perfect accordance that can be imagined: the only difference would be, that the one are uniting prayer with praise, because of their still-continued necessities; whereas the other engage in praise alone, having all their necessities for ever supplied. And here I would particularly call your attention to the prayer of Solomon, that you may see how much the subject of forgiveness is dwelt upon throughout the whole of it. He requests God’s attention to all who, under any calamity, shall, in future, direct their supplications towards that house: and, *in every distinct case*, he takes it for granted that sin has been the true and proper source of their calamity; and he implores in their behalf, not merely the removal of the judgment, but especially, and above all, the forgiveness of their sin^f. Nor must we overlook this, in God’s answer to his prayer: on the contrary, we must regard it as a pledge, that he will receive returning prodigals, and that all who approach him

^f See ver. 21, 22, 24, 26, 30, 36, 50.

with deep contrition shall find that “there is mercy with him, yea, with him is plenteous redemption.” I say, then, that this is a blessing which we are to look for, whensoever we approach God in the house of prayer. Every promise in God’s blessed word authorizes this hope: and no one should be satisfied with having offered up his petitions, if he carry not away with him a comfortable hope, that “his iniquities are forgiven, and his sins are covered.”

If it be asked, How shall we secure these blessings? I answer, Use the means which Solomon employed: and by them we may,

II. Secure to ourselves every blessing that our souls can desire—

We have seen that Solomon diversified his petitions according to the supposed conditions to which, at any future period, the people might be reduced. Whatever, therefore, our condition be, we must apply to God in prayer, with *humility of mind*, with *fervour of spirit*, with *confidence of heart*, and with *consistency of life and conversation*.

We must apply *with humility of mind*. Solomon particularly prays for those who “know every man the plague of his own heart^g.” Nor can we ever come before God with acceptance, unless we approach him weary and heavy laden with the burthen of our sins. To “draw nigh to him with our lips, whilst our heart is far from him, is vile hypocrisy: and “all such worship is vain,” yea, worse than vain, because it serves to lull our consciences asleep, and supersedes in our own minds the necessity of any better service. It is not possible for any man to have better direction, or more suitable help, than that provided for him in our Liturgy. The whole Service, from beginning to end, is the service of a sinner imploring mercy at the hands of God. What can express deeper humility than our General Confession? “Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep; we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts: we have left

^g See ver. 38.

undone those things which we ought to have done, and have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us.” He can know little of “the plague of his own heart,” who does not find those acknowledgments exactly suited to his state. At the beginning of the Litany, what can express the desires and feelings of a contrite spirit more justly than that reiterated cry to every person of the Holy Trinity to “have mercy upon us, as miserable sinners?” In the Communion Service, after the recital of every distinct command, we cry, “Lord, have mercy upon us for our past breaches of it, and incline our hearts to keep it in future.” Now this is the very frame in which we should draw nigh to God. There must be nothing in us of a self-righteous and self-applauding spirit. Blasphemy itself is not more hateful to God than that pride of heart, and formal self-complacency, wherewith the generality approach their God. The self-applauding Pharisee, with all his pretended thankfulness, was to God an object of abhorrence; whilst the poor self-condemning publican was liberated from the guilt of all his sins. And wherever there is a prayer like his, there shall also be the same success: for “the broken and contrite spirit, God never did, nor ever will, despise.”

But we must seek God, also, *with fervour of spirit*. Prayer is not a service merely of the lip and knee, but of the heart; and the whole heart should go forth to God in the performance of it. This was well understood by the compilers of our Liturgy; and ought to be understood, and felt, by every worshipper in the Established Church. The whole of the Liturgy breathes an ardour suited to the feelings and necessities of a contrite soul: “Lord, have mercy upon us: Christ, have mercy upon us: Lord, have mercy upon us.” Oh! what would not be obtained by a congregation pouring out those prayers with corresponding emotions? I will not say, that the house would be shaken, as it was when the Apostles prayed^h; but I will say, that the worshippers would

^h Acts iv. 31.

all "be filled with the Holy Ghost," not indeed in his miraculous powers, but in his enlivening, comforting, and transforming energies. We may form some idea of the frame which is proper for us, from the very attitude in which Solomon addressed his prayer to God: "He fell down on his knees, and spread forth his hands to heaven." How different this from the irreverent and careless attitude of many amongst us, who, instead of prostrating themselves before God with becoming reverence, sit during the prayers; shewing, thereby, how little they feel the elevation of a devout worshipper, or the humiliation of a contrite one! Be it known unto you, that God must be importuned in prayer, and that "the kingdom of heaven must be taken by violence," if ever it be taken at all: and, if you find that common efforts will not suffice to bring you to your Saviour's presence, you must resemble those who went up to the top of the house and let down the paralytic through the roof: you must "*cry* unto God," and "give him no rest," and not cease from your importunity, till you have obtained an answer to your prayer. It was in this way that the widow in the parable prevailed over the unjust judge; and in this way shall every child of man prevail, if only he will "pray, and not faint."

The confidence of the heart is yet further necessary: for our hands must be lifted up "without doubting;" "nor can we hope to receive any thing from God, if we supplicate him with a wavering mind." It must be remembered, that the Temple was called, "A house of sacrificeⁱ." On this occasion sacrifices were offered without number; and on every morning and evening throughout the year they were regularly presented to the Lord. Now this shewed, that every prayer which was there offered was to find acceptance by virtue of those sacrifices; and that no blessing whatever could be obtained from God, but through faith in the atonement which those sacrifices prefigured. The same is strikingly illustrated in the Liturgy of the Church of England; not a prayer of

ⁱ 2 Chron. vii. 12.

which is offered, but in the name and through the mediation of Jesus Christ. To him must we look in all our addresses at the throne of grace, and to the Father through him. Indeed, this is very particularly marked in the whole of Solomon's prayer. In the greater part of that prayer he intercedes in behalf of those who should direct their supplications "toward that house." Now the Temple itself was a very eminent type of Christ, "in whom dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." The body of the Lord Jesus is, on this very account, represented as "a tabernacle, not made with hands:" and towards him, as our incarnate God, must we direct our supplications, if we would obtain answers of peace unto our souls. If we come to God in this way, we then have an express assurance from God himself, that "we shall in no wise be cast out;" but that, on the contrary, "the Lord Jesus Christ himself will confer upon us whatsoever we ask, that the Father may be glorified in the Son:" so indispensable is it that we look towards that Temple; and so certain is the success of prayers when so directed.

One thing more is necessary, and that is, *consistency of life and conversation*. "The prayer of the wicked," so far from finding acceptance with the Lord, is altogether "an abomination to him." How can it be expected, that persons coming to the house of God with all the professions of real piety, and going from thence into all the dissipation and vanity of the world, shall obtain mercy of the Lord? Behold them on their knees, crying, "From all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, Good Lord, deliver us;" and then, perhaps, spending the remainder of the day, not in reading the Bible, not in instructing their families, not in fervent prayer to God, but in any light conversation and specious amusement, that may enable them to relieve the weariness of a Sabbath evening. Say, Is this consistent? Nay, would these people themselves, if they saw persons who were truly religious, and who had entered fully into the spirit of the prayers, so

spending the Sabbath, account them upright and consistent characters? No: they would see at once the glaring inconsistency between such professions and such practice. But, perhaps, they will say, "We do not make any such profession of religion." Then, I answer, you have gone to God with a lie in your mouths. What mean you when you pray, "that you may lead a righteous, sober, and a godly life, to the glory of God's holy name?" Is dissipation, or carelessness to his praise and glory? Has he not required that "you should refrain from doing your own pleasure on his holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and should honour him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words; but should throughout that day delight yourselves in the Lord^k?" Yes, this is what you will do, if you are consistent Christians; nor can you in any other way expect to obtain any blessing from the Lord. This, also, is very particularly noticed by Solomon in his prayer: he does not venture to hope for mercy on behalf of any, unless "they return unto God with all their heart and with all their soul^l." He prays, "The Lord our God be with us, that he may incline our hearts unto him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and his statutes, and his judgments, which he commanded our fathers^m." And then, to impress this the more deeply on the people's minds, he addresses them also, saying, "Let your heart be perfect with the Lord our God, to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments, as at this dayⁿ." Solomon would have the solemnities of that day carried, as it were, into their daily converse; and the engagements then entered into, remembered throughout their whole lives. Thus it should be with *us*: and thus it *must* be with us, if we would prosper in our souls. Our prayers are to be the pattern of our whole lives. What we have sought for,

^k Isai. lviii. 13, 14.

^m ver. 57, 58.

^l ver. 47, 48.

ⁿ ver. 61.

and obtained in the house of God, must be exhibited and exemplified in our daily walk: and, if there be not a correspondence between the two, what do we but proclaim ourselves hypocrites before the whole world? We “cannot serve God and Mammon too;” nor must we pretend to “fear the Lord, whilst we are serving other gods.” But, if we will indeed devote ourselves to the Lord, then shall our prayers descend in blessings on our souls, and the services of time be a prelude to the enjoyments of eternity. Hear the answer which God made to Solomon on this very occasion: “Now, mine eyes shall be open, and mine ears attent unto the prayer that is made in this place: for now have I chosen and sanctified this house: and my name shall be there for ever: and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there continually. If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

Permit me now, in conclusion, to take yet further the example of Solomon for my guide; and, as he in his prayer addressed himself to God in behalf of his own people, and of the strangers who sojourned amongst them, so now to address myself, first, to *the stated inhabitants* of this place, and then to *those, who, as strangers, are sojourning here only for a season.*

The stated inhabitants I would congratulate on the further accommodation which they will now receive for the worship of Almighty God. For though the provision now made is very inadequate to the wants of this daily augmenting population, it will doubtless be of important service, and serve as a prelude, I trust, to somewhat which shall be still more effectual.

The necessity of waiting upon God in public is here obviously proclaimed. But there is an improvement of the occasion, which, though less obvious, is

not a whit less necessary, and which I would take the liberty earnestly to recommend; and that is, the establishment of prayer in your own families. Who that sees the zeal of Solomon on this occasion, does not perceive the duty of every head of a family? We cannot all raise public edifices to the Lord; but we may all set up altars in our own houses, and promote the worship of God amongst those who are within the sphere of our own influence. God has said, that "where two or three are met together in his name, there will he be in the midst of them;" and that, "when two or three agree respecting what they shall ask," he will confer it upon them. If any say, that they feel unequal to the task of conducting family worship, they need not be discouraged on that account, because there are abundant aids afforded them, both in the formularies of our Church, and in other books that are written for that express purpose.

And let me not omit this occasion of inculcating the duty of private prayer. This is absolutely indispensable to every child of man. Without this, no soul can prosper: without this, no sinner in the universe can find acceptance with God. In the public Services of the Church, your petitions must be, for the most part, general, and such as all the congregation can join in: but in your private chambers you may, every one of you, spread before the Lord your own personal transgressions, and implore at his hands those blessings which you more especially stand in need of. Remember, I pray you, that on your own personal application to God in prayer is suspended all your hope of mercy and forgiveness. "God will be inquired of by us" for those gifts which he has most freely promised and covenanted to bestow. "Ask, and ye shall have; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." These are the terms with which we must comply: and, if we will not ask, it is in vain to hope that we shall obtain any thing of the Lord.

Let the duty of prayer generally, of public, social, and private prayer, be this day impressed upon your

minds ; and you will have reason to bless God to all eternity for the occasion that has suggested to you so important and necessary a reflection.

To *the occasional visitors* who are here present, I would beg leave, also, to offer a seasonable suggestion. You will observe that Solomon, in the benevolence of his heart, was especially mindful of strangers. “Concerning a stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name’s sake, when he shall come and pray toward this house, hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for^p.” So would I now be mindful of you, and affectionately entreat you to improve the occasion which may have brought you hither. The improvement of your bodily health may be supposed to have had some influence in directing you to this place : in truth, many are brought hither, even from a great distance, for the promoting of this end. And shall not the soul, also, have a just measure of your regard ? Shall nothing be deemed too expensive or self-denying for the obtaining of bodily health, and no attention whatever be paid to the soul ? Consider, I pray you, of what infinitely greater importance the interests of eternity are than the concerns of time ; and how far more certain in its efficacy the fountain of salvation is, which is opened for us in the Gospel, than any which this place, or any other in the universe, can boast. And I thank God that this fountain of salvation is here opened to you, and is accessible to all. Here you may be cleansed from sin and uncleanness, so as to be made altogether pure, without spot or blemish. And O ! how rich a mercy will it be, if, when coming hither only for the restoration of your bodily health, you should find health also to your souls ! Then, when you have left this place, you will look towards it with affectionate remembrance, from the very ends of the earth : and, above all, you will look to Him whom

the Temple of old typified, the Lord Jesus Christ, and bless him for the dispensation which led you to the knowledge of him, and to the acquisition of his favour.

CCCXXXIV.

THE REQUISITES FOR ACCEPTABLE PRAYER.

1 Kings viii. 38, 39. *What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house : then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest.*

RELIGION is often thought to be an employment fit only for weak minds, or for those who have nothing else to engage their attention; but it is worthy the pursuit of the wisest and greatest of men. Never did Solomon appear more glorious than when uttering these words. At the head of all his subjects he dedicated his temple to God. He set them a bright example of piety and devotion; and interceded, not for them only, but for all succeeding generations.

In this portion of his instructive prayer we may see,

I. The requisites for acceptable prayer—

An humble, upright, fervent, believing, submissive, obediential frame of mind is necessary when we approach the throne of grace. But the most essential requisites for acceptable worship are comprised in,

1. A deep sense of our own depravity—

[The “plague of one’s own heart” is, one’s in-dwelling corruption^a. “Every one” has some “sin that more easily besets him;” and this sin he ought to know. Not that a mere

^a Some understand “plague” as expressing some loathsome disorder; and the rather because it is translated “sore” in the parallel passage, 2 Chron. vi. 29. This is the true sense of it when it relates to the body; but *here* the heart is represented as the seat of this disorder, and therefore it must be understood of sin. This is confirmed by what is said in the text, of God’s knowing the heart.

acquaintance with this plague is sufficient : we must know the depth and inveteracy of our disorder. Our knowledge too must produce an unfeigned self-abhorrence, and a full conviction of our utter helplessness : nor without this knowledge can we offer up one acceptable prayer. We cannot lament what we neither feel nor know ; or seek for mercy, when we perceive not our need of it. While ignorant of our depravity, we are not in a state to receive mercy : we should not even be willing to accept of mercy on God's terms. The very offers of salvation would rather excite our displeasure than our gratitude^b.]

2. A believing view of Christ—

[The temple of Solomon was the more immediate residence of the Deity : all were on this account directed to look towards it when they prayed. That temple was typical of the Lord Jesus Christ^c : in him “ dwells all the fulness of the God-head bodily : ” to him our eyes are therefore to be directed^d. We are to offer all our petitions to him, or in his name^e. This regard to him is necessary to the acceptance of our prayers : it is through him alone that we gain access to the Deity^f. We cannot approach the Father in any other way^g ; nor is there any other channel whereby the divine blessings can flow down to us^h. On these accounts we must “ stretch out our hands towards ” HIM : we must view HIM as our only source of spiritual blessings.]

They who truly seek after God will soon experience,

II. The efficacy of prayer when attended with those requisites—

Cold or unbelieving petitions will receive no answerⁱ ; but humble and believing prayer will obtain the richest blessings :

I. National—

[The passage before us relates to the whole Jewish nation : it supposes them to have incurred the heavy displeasure of

^b A man, not sensible that he had subjected himself to capital punishment by breaking the laws of his country, would reject with indignation an offer of deliverance from an ignominious death : but a self-condemned criminal on the eve of his execution would receive such an offer gladly.

^c See John ii. 19, 21. and compare Exod. xxiii. 21. with the expression “ My name shall be there,” 1 Kings viii. 29.

^d Isai. xlv. 22.

^e John xiv. 13, 14.

^f Eph. ii. 18.

^g John xiv. 6.

^h John i. 16.

ⁱ Jam. iv. 3. Matt. xv. 8, 9. Jam. i. 6, 7.

God, and teaches them how they are to avert his wrath; nor did God leave them in suspense about the issue of such humiliation: he declared in a vision to Solomon that his petitions were accepted^k. The Jewish history affords many striking instances of deliverance vouchsafed to a repenting people^l; nor can we doubt but that the same means will still be crowned with the like success^m.]

2. Personal—

He who “knows our heart” will grant all that we can desireⁿ:

Forgiveness of sin—

[Who more infamous and abandoned than that woman^o? Yet she, in humility and faith, applied to Jesus^p, and received an assurance that her iniquities were forgiven^q. And shall not we obtain mercy if we apply to him in the same humble and believing way?]

Peace of conscience—

[How troubled, almost to distraction, were the murderers of our Lord^r! But, according to Peter’s direction, they looked to Jesus^s, and were immediately filled with “peace and joy in believing^t.”]

* Deliverance from temporal troubles—

[We cannot conceive greater temporal affliction than that endured by Jonah^u; yet, when to appearance irrecoverably lost, he prayed in this manner^x, and experienced a most unparalleled deliverance^y.]

* Victory over our spiritual enemies—

[With what vehemence did Satan assault the Apostle Paul^z! The afflicted saint cried with earnestness to the Lord Jesus^a: his troubles were immediately turned into triumphant exultations^b.]

^k 2 Chron. vii. 12—14.

^l Jehoshaphat praying according to the direction in the text, 2 Chron. xx. 5—13, expressly reminded God of his promise, ver. 9. And the success of his prayer far exceeded all reasonable expectation; see ver. 22—25.

^m If this were a *Fast Sermon*, it would be proper to enlarge a little on this idea in reference to the peculiar state of the nation at the time.

ⁿ 1 John v. 14, 15.

^o Luke vii. 37, 39.

^p Luke vii. 38.

^q Luke vii. 47, 48, 50.

^r Acts ii. 37.

^s Acts ii. 38.

^t Acts ii. 46.

^u Jonah ii. 1—3.

^x Jonah ii. 4, 7.

^y Jonah ii. 10.

^z 2 Cor. xii. 7.

^a 2 Cor. xii. 8.

^b 2 Cor. xii. 9.

Renewal after the divine image—

[Nothing on earth does a believer desire so much as this; yet this shall be attained in the same way. An humble and believing view of Christ shall effect it^e.]

* A peaceful death—

[Stephen died by the hands of cruel and blood-thirsty enemies^d; but he offered an humble and believing prayer to Christ^e, and his death was to him as a serene and peaceful sleep^f.]

A glorious immortality—

[He who died *justly* by the hands of the public executioner must have merited in an high degree the wrath of God^g; nevertheless in his last hour he directed his eyes to Christ^h; and that very day was he admitted with Christ to Paradiseⁱ.]

APPLICATION—

[Let none despair on account of the greatness of their sins, or of the judgments of God which are already inflicted on them. God will suffer none to “seek his face in vain.” Let every one then bewail “the plague of his own heart,” and offer up believing prayers “towards God’s holy oracle^k.”]

^e 2 Cor. iii. 18.

^d Acts vii. 54.

^e Acts vii. 59.

^f Acts vii. 60.

^g Luke xxxiii. 41.

^h Luke xxxiii. 42.

ⁱ Luke xxxiii. 43.

^k This will suffice for two Sermons; the first head being the subject of one, and the second head of the other. If it form the ground of one Sermon only, those particulars which are marked with an asterisk * under the second head may be omitted.

CCCXXXV.

SOLOMON’S THANKSGIVING PRAYER.

1 Kings viii. 54—61. *And it was so, that when Solomon had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication unto the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven. And he stood, and blessed all the congregation of Israel with a loud voice, saying, Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised: there hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant. The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our fathers: let him not leave us, nor forsake us: that he may incline our hearts unto him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and his statutes, and his judgments, which he commanded our*

fathers. And let these my words, wherewith I have made supplication before the Lord, be nigh unto the Lord our God day and night, that he maintain the cause of his servant, and the cause of his people Israel at all times, as the matter shall require: that all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, and that there is none else. Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God, to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments, as at this day.

TO men Solomon might appear most glorious when seated on his throne, and surrounded by all his courtiers: but in the eyes of God he never was so glorious, as when he was leading the devotions of all his people, and imploring blessings on them from above. Neither actuated by ostentation, nor restrained by shame, he erected a stage or pulpit in the court of the temple near the altar, and there in the midst of all the congregation kneeled down upon his knees, and with his hands stretched out to heaven poured forth his soul in the devoutest supplications. The prayer he uttered was of considerable length, and, as it should seem, the extemporaneous effusion of his own heart. How happy would it be, if all our kings were so disposed, or even if all the ministers of the sanctuary were alike earnest in their acknowledgment of God, and qualified to conduct, from the abundance of their own hearts, the service of his sanctuary!

After having offered to God his prayer and supplication, he rose from his knees to bless the people. By "blessing them," we are not to suppose that he pretended to have any fulness in himself, whereby to make them blessed: it is not in man, however great, to make others blessed; he can only ministerially declare what God has promised, or implore in their behalf the blessing of God upon them. This is what was done by the priests of old^a, and this is what he did on this occasion.

The words in which he blessed them contain,

I. An address to God—

This consisted of two parts:

^a Numb. vi. 23—26.

1. A thanksgiving for mercies received—

[God had now fulfilled in its utmost extent the promises which he had given to Israel. "The whole land, from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates^b," was under Solomon's dominion: the most perfect rest and peace prevailed throughout the whole empire^c: and a place was now erected, on a spot chosen by God himself, for his worship and service^d. Of "all the promises which God had given by Moses, not one word had failed:" all was come to pass; and the whole nation enjoyed a state of unprecedented prosperity. For these things Solomon now "blessed the Lord," both in his own name, and in the name of all the people.

Have *we* received such blessings from the Lord? let *us* then bless him too. Have we a peaceable enjoyment of God's ordinances, and freedom from the assaults of open enemies? Have we union also and harmony amongst ourselves? let us be thankful for these mercies: it is not every Church that enjoys them; nor can any thing but the peculiar favour of Heaven continue them to us.

But what if we have experienced an accomplishment of that promise of our Lord, "Come unto me, and I will give you rest?" What if we have obtained a victory over all our spiritual enemies, and be living in a sweet sense of God's love, and the habitual enjoyment of his presence? Shall not *we* bless the name of our God, yea, bless him too with all our faculties and all our powers? — — —]

2. A prayer for the continuance of them—

[The presence of God with them comprehended every blessing that Solomon could desire; and therefore Solomon entreated God "never to leave them nor forsake them^e." This alone could "incline their hearts" to serve the Lord^f: this alone could secure to them a complete enjoyment of their happiness^g: this alone could enable them to glorify their God in the world^h.

And what can any one desire more in *your* behalf? If "God be with you," and operate in you effectually for these ends and purposes, you are blessed, you must be blessed for ever. On the contrary, "Woe be to them," saith God, "when I depart from themⁱ!" Yes, if he depart, we shall have no more "inclination to walk in his ways," but shall surely "walk after the imagination of our own evil hearts:" we shall no more be able to "maintain our own cause" against our spiritual adversaries, but shall fall a prey to every lust: we

^b Gen. xv. 18. with Deut. xi. 24.

^d Deut. xii. 11.

^g ver. 59.

^e ver. 57.

^h ver. 60.

^c 1 Kings v. 4.

^f ver. 58.

ⁱ Hos. ix. 12.

shall no more constrain the world to admire "the exceeding grace of God in us," but shall rather cause them "to blaspheme his holy name.

May God therefore bless you with his continued presence and his effectual grace!]

This address to God he concluded with,

II. An exhortation to the people—

Solomon would not dismiss the people without exhorting them to perform their duties to God, who had so loaded them with his richest benefits: he therefore besought them,

1. To be perfect with the Lord—

[Absolute perfection is not to be attained in this world^k: but there is a perfection which every Christian must attain, a perfection of desire, of purpose, and of endeavour. We should see such a beauty in holiness as to long for the utmost possible attainment of it: we should *desire* to "be holy as God is holy," and "perfect as our Father which is in heaven is perfect." At this too we should *aim*: the great object of our lives should be to mortify every thing that is contrary to God's will, and to get his law perfectly engraven upon our hearts. To be "cast into the very mould of the Gospel," and to be "renewed after the perfect image of our God in righteousness and true holiness," should be the ambition of our souls. After this also should we *labour*; never thinking that we have attained any thing, whilst any thing remains to be attained. This was the state of the Apostle Paul^l, and must be the state of every one that would be approved of his God^m.

Is it thought by any, that, in requiring this, we require too much? I ask, For what has "God given us such exceeding great and precious promises," but that "by them we may be partakers of the divine nature, and escape the corruption that is in the world through lustⁿ?" I ask again, What is the use which God teaches us to make of his promises? Is it not to "cleanse ourselves by their means from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God^o?" I ask yet further, What is the desire which every pious minister will feel in behalf of his people; and to what will he endeavour, both in his private prayers and his public labours, to bring them? Is it not, "that they may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God^p?" Away then with all apprehensions that we require too much: we require only what God

^k Eccl. vii. 20. Jam. iii. 2.

^l Phil. iii. 12—14.

^m Phil. iii. 15.

ⁿ 2 Pet. i. 4.

^o 2 Cor. vii. 1.

^p Col. iv. 12.

requires, and what every soul that shall ever be saved, must possess: in actual attainments there will, in spite of our utmost exertions, be much lacking; but in desire, purpose, and endeavour, we must be perfect, not willingly harbouring the smallest imperfection^a, but striving to “grow up into Christ in all things, as our living Head.”]

2. To preserve continually the frame they now possessed—

[The people now, as well as their king, were in a very devout and heavenly frame: there was nothing they would not now have done, or sacrificed, for the honour of their God. Solomon therefore says to them, “Be perfect with the Lord, *as at this day.*” Now there are times when every godly person has felt himself more especially alive to the concerns of eternity: he has been humbled in the dust, under a sense of his own guilt and helplessness; he has been filled with admiration at the divine goodness to him; he has longed to have God ever with him, and to find all his happiness in the presence of his God. If such, then, have ever been our state, is there not the same reason that it should be so now? Does God deserve less at our hands, than he did at the period referred to? Why then do we not feel the same towards him? Perhaps we may be disposed to look back upon such seasons with complacency; but we should rather look upon all other seasons with shame and sorrow. O labour, Brethren, to preserve upon your minds those better feelings which you have at any time experienced; and, instead of declining from them, to get them revived and strengthened from day to day!

Such is the blessing, which, were it at our disposal, we would bestow upon you; and such is the blessing which we entreat of God to confer on every one amongst you.]

^a 1 Chron. xxviii. 9.

CCCXXXVI.

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA'S VISIT TO SOLOMON.

1 Kings x. 6, 7. *And she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom. Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it: and, behold, the half was not told me.*

IT not unfrequently happens, that when the mind has been raised in any extraordinary degree by the representations of others, its expectations are disappointed: either the excellencies which appeared

so fascinating to others, have been over-rated; or they are found blended with such defects, as greatly lessen their value. This is particularly the case with respect to the characters of men; in estimating which, it is easy to conceive, that our admiration may be too great, and our applause be too unqualified. But, in the passage before us, we have an instance where report, though heightened to the utmost, fell short of the reality. The wisdom of Solomon had attracted the attention of all the nations around him; insomuch that persons were sent from all the surrounding potentates, to ascertain whether the reports concerning him were true^a: and in the chapter before us, we are informed, that a queen of great power and authority came herself, in order to see with her own eyes, and hear with her own ears, the wonderful things which had been reported to her: and her testimony, after the fullest investigation, was, not only that all was true which had been told her, but that the half had not been told her; so greatly did the truth exceed her most sanguine expectations.

This circumstance deserves particular consideration, not merely for the honour of Solomon, but chiefly for the honour of Him whom Solomon prefigured, even of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Let us notice then,

I. The surprise occasioned by an acquaintance with Solomon—

We do not know the precise reports which the Queen of Sheba had heard; but they related principally, we apprehend, to the wisdom of Solomon. His splendour and magnificence indeed were unparalleled; but his wisdom was that which most of all induced her to come so far; for “she came to prove him with hard questions,” and “to commune with him of all that was in her heart.” Now “his wisdom excelled that of all mankind^b:” it was not confined to any one branch of science, but embraced the whole

^a 1 Kings iv. 34.

^b 1 Kings iv. 30, 31.

extent of philosophy, natural and political, moral and religious. It extended, I say, to things,

1. Natural—

[Universal nature seemed, as it were, to be open to his view: “He spake of trees, from the cedar-tree that is in Lebanon, even to the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes^c.” The distinctive properties of each in their several classes were comprehended by him; but whether from study or from revelation, we do not know: such knowledge however, though curious and entertaining, was probably in point of utility the lowest that he possessed. Still it could not fail to interest an inquisitive mind, and to excite an high admiration of him in the breast of this intelligent queen.]

2. Political—

[The perfection of his laws, the equity of his administration, the penetration exercised by him in his judicial capacity, the order in which every thing, whether in his civil or domestic concerns, was arranged; the grandeur of his edifices, the splendour of his court, the peacefulness of his reign, the prosperity of his people, and the whole extent of his political economy, bespoke him almost more than human; and made the admiring queen envy the lowest of his servants, who were honoured with access to his presence^d.]

3. Moral—

[He had spoken three thousand proverbs, and composed above a thousand songs^e. What depths of wisdom were contained in these we may judge from those which have come down to us. The whole subject of ethics was familiar to his mind, so that he needed not to draw conclusions in a way of rational argumentation, but was enabled to declare with unerring certainty the duty of man in every relation, and in every circumstance of life. The most difficult cases were easy to his comprehensive mind; and the clouds with which they were enveloped were dispelled by him as before the rising sun. We wonder not that, when she heard his oracular discourses, she was lost in utter amazement.]

4. Religious—

[This, after all, was the wisdom by which the Queen of Sheba sought most to profit: “When she heard of the fame of Solomon *concerning the name of the Lord*, she came to prove him with hard questions^f.” Earnestly did she desire to be

^c 1 Kings iv. 33.

^d ver. 4, 5, 8.

^e 1 Kings iv. 32.

^f ver. 1.

informed concerning the nature and perfections of God; and the way in which he was to be worshipped; and how a sinner might find acceptance with him. These and numberless other points Solomon no doubt opened to her with such clearness and perspicuity, as carried the fullest conviction to her mind. Nor can we doubt but that as she would inquire respecting the sacrifices and oblations, he would point out to her the figurative nature, and typical intent, of every thing that she beheld; the temple, its furniture, its ordinances, its ministers, its service altogether. Glorious would be the opportunity afforded him of commending to her the God of Israel, and of pointing out to her that Messiah in whom all these types should receive their accomplishment; and no doubt he availed himself of it. Well therefore might such transcendent wisdom overwhelm her with astonishment, so that "there was no more spirit in her^g:" and well might she say, that "the half had not been told her."]

Let us now turn from Solomon, to contemplate,
II. The surprise which an acquaintance with Jesus Christ will occasion—

Our views must not be confined to Solomon; for beyond all doubt "a greater than Solomon is here." Solomon was an eminent type of Christ; as is clear from many passages of Scripture, and especially the 72d Psalm, which is not more applicable to Solomon in the letter of it, than it is to Christ in the spirit. Solomon was the first who could be called "a king, and a king's son;" and therefore a fit type of that Son of David who is "King of kings, and Lord of lords."

Now of Jesus are great things spoken in the Holy Scriptures: and as the Queen of Sheba "believed not the reports concerning Solomon, till she came to see him with her own eyes," so respecting Jesus it must be said, "Who hath believed our report^h?" But if once we behold him with the eye of faith, we shall then indeed say that the half had not been told us. Two things in particular we shall be amazed at;

1. The glory of his person—

[Let us behold him in his whole office and character, and so behold him as to have any just conception of his excellency,

^g ver. 5.

^h Rom. x. 16.

and we shall be altogether lost in wonder, so that there will be "no more spirit in us." Even in his *human* nature, wherein the glory of his majesty is veiled, we are utterly astonished at all his spotless perfections. His wisdom, his goodness, his love, and all his other virtues, surpass our utmost conceptions. In the view of him many hundreds of years before he came into the world, the Church exclaimed, "He is chiefest among ten thousand," "he is altogether lovelyⁱ!" In his *divine* nature, "he is the brightness of his Father's glory, and the express image of his person^k" — — — In his *mediatorial* character, he is "the power of God and the wisdom of God^l." He has within himself all fulness treasured up^m: nothing is wanting that can secure the happiness and salvation of his redeemed people. His meritorious sacrifice is a sufficient satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. His unspotted righteousness affords a robe, whereby all the fallen race of Adam may "cover their nakedness," and stand spotless in the presence of an holy God. In him is a fountain of all grace, from which every believer may receive an inexhaustible supplyⁿ. Let us only "behold, I say, his glory, as the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth^o," and we shall immediately exclaim with the prophet, "How great is his goodness, how great is his beauty^p!"

2. The felicity of his people—

[This in particular was contemplated by the Queen of Sheba in reference to Solomon. After saying to him, "Thy wisdom and thy prosperity exceed the fame which I heard," she added, "Happy are thy men, happy are these thy servants, which stand continually before thee, and that hear thy wisdom^q!" But with how much greater propriety may this be said respecting the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ! Much is said of it indeed in the Scriptures^r; but little of it is believed, till it is known by actual experience. But let it once be *felt*, and truly we shall say, "The half had not been told us." Indeed the Scriptures speak of it in this very view: their "*peace passeth all understanding*;" and their "*joy is unspeakable and glorified*." To this, as well as to the mysteries of faith, may we apply those words of the Apostle, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him: but God hath revealed them to us by his Spirit^s." It is to what is experienced *in this world* that those words are

ⁱ Cant. v. 10, 16.

^k Heb. i. 3.

^l 1 Cor. i. 24.

^m Col. i. 24.

ⁿ John i. 16.

^o John i. 14.

^p Zech. ix. 9, 17.

^q ver. 7, 8.

^r Ps. lxxxix. 15—17.

^s 1 Cor. ii. 9, 10.

to be applied: but if we look forward to the eternal world, with what emphasis may we pronounce them then! If the glory of Christ be so bright when beheld only through the dark medium of faith, how will it appear when we shall behold him face to face! And if our happiness be so great now that we carry about with us a body of sin and death, what shall it be, when our corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and we shall possess without alloy the full fruition of our God! Happy, happy beyond conception shall we be, when we are enabled to say, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee!"]

This subject FURNISHES US with abundant matter,

1. For reproof—

[It was in this view that our Lord himself improved it in his day^t: and may not we take up the same complaint against you and say, "The Queen of the South (of Sheba) shall rise up in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold a greater than Solomon is here?" How little is Christ sought after and admired amongst us! The Queen of Sheba counted no expense or trouble too great to obtain an acquaintance with Solomon; but we grudge any labour that may be necessary to bring us to an acquaintance with Christ: almost any thing is a sufficient excuse to keep us from the public ordinances, and especially to make us neglect the private duties of religion. Oh, let us blush and be ashamed, that when our means of access to Christ are so easy, we are so indifferent about him; that we rest contentedly without the knowledge of him, when, if we judged aright, "we should count all things but dung in comparison of it"^u!" The Queen of Sheba did not consider even the affairs of a large empire of sufficient importance to keep her from seeking an interview with Solomon: let nothing detain us from visiting the Lord Jesus. To sit at his feet and hear his gracious instructions should be regarded by us as "the one thing needful"^x.]

2. For encouragement—

[That the Queen of Sheba derived much spiritual benefit from her visit to Solomon is manifest, from the manner in which she adored Jehovah for his mercy and grace in raising Solomon to the throne of Israel^y. And will the Lord Jesus Christ suffer any one to "seek *his* face in vain?" Are we not told, "Then shall ye know, if ye follow on to know the Lord?" and, "The

^t Matt. xii. 42.

^x Luke x. 42.

^u Phil. iii. 8.

^y ver. 9.

meek he will guide in judgment, the meek he will teach his way?" Let us take encouragement and go unto him; for we have advantages which the Queen of Sheba had not. Solomon could impart knowledge to her, but could not enable her to comprehend it: but Jesus can both "open to us the Scriptures," and "open our understandings also to understand them:" yea, and if we go humbly unto him, he will return with us to our respective homes, and be our instructor even unto death. Let us then "buy the truth," whatever it may cost us, and "not sell it" for the whole world. Methinks the Queen of Sheba never afterwards regretted the labour she had bestowed on that great object; and sure I am that none who seek the Lord, shall ever have to complain that "they have laboured in vain, or spent their strength for nought^z."

^z Isai. xlix. 4.

CCCXXXVII.

SOLOMON'S FALL.

1 Kings xi. 9. *And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice.*

IF we had beheld the temple of Solomon, with all its exquisite workmanship, destroyed, as soon as it was finished, methinks we should have wept over it as a calamity never to be forgotten. But we are now called to survey a far more grievous desolation, even the destruction of the fairest edifice that ever was raised,—the soul of Solomon. Most eminently had the grace of God wrought in him, as all his preceding history informs us. Since the foundation of the world there was not a grander spectacle, than that of Solomon elevated on a brasen platform in the midst of the temple, and crying unto God with bended knees and out-stretched hands in the behalf of himself and people to their latest posterity. But "how is the gold become dim, and the most fine gold changed!" We behold in nature some clouds occasionally obscuring the brightest sky, and sometimes even the meridian sun eclipsed; but here was such an eclipse as never had been seen, since Adam

fell in paradise : here was the brightest day turned suddenly into the darkest night ; the most eminent of saints relapsing into a state of most aggravated and abiding transgression.

Let us turn, like Abraham surveying the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrha the morning after they were destroyed^a, and contemplate,

I. The fall of Solomon—

In order to get a just view of it, let us distinctly notice,

1. How it began—

[It began the very instant he was raised to the throne, though in a way that was not perceived by him at the time. We do not condemn him for marrying Pharaoh's daughter, because we take for granted that she was a proselyte to the Jewish faith. That she was so, may be presumed from the very circumstance of his connexion with her ; for we cannot conceive that he would have so grossly violated the divine law as to marry an heathen woman, at the very time that his piety was so transcendently conspicuous : and this presumption is confirmed by the circumstance, that amongst all the idolatrous temples that he built for his other wives, he never erected any for the idols of Egypt. But the evil of which he was guilty in the commencement of his reign was, the offering of sacrifice in high places, instead of confining himself to the altar which was in the tabernacle. We are decidedly of opinion that he should not have done this himself, nor should he have suffered his people to do it^b : and we are persuaded that this error, continued as it was for eleven years at least, rendered him less averse than he would otherwise have been, to the erection of temples afterwards to heathen gods.

Other evils of his which gradually crept in, were, the multiplying of gold and silver *for himself* ; the multiplying of horses also, and that *from Egypt* ; and, above all, the multiplying of wives. All of these things were forbidden in as plain and express a manner as could be conceived^c : yet, as if he had never read any such prohibition in the word of God, did he go on violating it from day to day^d.]

^a Gen. xix. 27, 28.

^b Compare 1 Kings iii. 1—3. with Deut. xii. 2—6.

^c Deut. xvii. 16, 17.

^d In amassing gold, not, as David, for *the Lord*, but for *his own aggrandizement* : see 1 Kings x. 21. In increasing horses ; see 1 Kings iv. 26. and x. 26. and especially from Egypt ; see 1 Kings x. 28. In multiplying wives ; see ver. 3.

2. To what an extent it proceeded—

[There was not any thing more strongly prohibited in the Law than the forming of connexions with heathen women^e: yet it was not from among the women of his own nation that he took his wives and concubines, but from among the “ Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites.” What an astonishing infatuation was here! Perhaps in the first two or three instances he might hope to convert them, as Pharaoh’s daughter had been converted: but after having broken down the fence of the divine law, he roved afterwards at pleasure throughout the world. Soon the consequences which might have been expected, ensued: his heart was drawn away from God; and he not only *suffered them* to commit idolatry in the land, but he even *favoured* their idolatry, and actually *built temples* for their gods, and that too even *in Jerusalem itself*, where Jehovah’s temple was: nor did he do this only for one or two whom he peculiarly favoured, but “ *for all* his strange wives:” yea, incredible as it may appear, he *actually united with them in the worship of their idols*, and alienated to them the affections due only to the God of Israel^f. Who that had seen Solomon at the dedication of the temple, would ever have conceived that he should fall at last to such a degraded state as this?]

3. With what aggravations it was attended—

[Solomon had from a child been eminently beloved of the Lord: God had even given him the name Jedidiah in token of that love^g. He had been especially appointed to build the temple of the Lord^h: and both before and after he had built the temple, was honoured with peculiar visits from God himselfⁱ. In the latter of these visits God had strongly warned him against the very evils which he afterwards committed^k: and yet did Solomon very speedily rush into the commission of them^l. Now these things God himself notices as aggravations of his guilt: he complains, that Solomon did these things “ after God had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not do it.” Surely such ingratitude and impiety were scarcely ever combined in any other child of man!]

^e Deut. vii. 3, 4.

^f ver. 4—8. His wives *turned away his heart* after other gods . . . he *went after Ashtoreth, &c.* ^g 2 Sam. xii. 24, 25.

^h 1 Chron. xxii. 9, 10. ⁱ Compare 1 Kings iii. 5. and ix. 2.

^k 1 Kings ix. 3—7.

^l He had reigned at least twenty years before the second visit. 1 Kings ix. 1, 10.

4. With what consequences it was followed—

["God was angry with him," as well he might be; and he declared to Solomon that the kingdom of which he had rendered himself so unworthy, should be taken from him, and given to a servant of his^m. This judgment however should be both deferred and mitigated; yet not for his sake, but for his father David's sake. Great as David's crimes had been in the matter of Uriah, he had never for a moment countenanced idolatry; and therefore *for his sake* should two of the tribes be reserved for his descendants, whilst the other ten should be rent away from them; and *for his sake* should the evil be deferred, till Solomon himself should be removed into the eternal worldⁿ. Thus was the very mitigation of the punishment as humiliating, as the denunciation of it was painful. Immediately did God stir up adversaries to Solomon, to disquiet his peaceful reign, and to embitter the remainder of his days^o. What the event of his transgression was in the eternal world, we cannot certainly declare. We hope and believe that Solomon repented, and was forgiven; (the Book of Ecclesiastes seems to have been written after this period, and to contain the evidence of his repentance;) but there is no express mention of any such thing; so that it must remain uncertain till the day of judgment, whether he was not left to suffer the everlasting displeasure of an offended God. What a fearful thought! that so bright a sun should set at last under so dark a cloud!]

Inexpressibly awful is the account here given us. Let us now proceed to consider,

II. The instruction to be gathered from it—

Never was a history more replete with instruction than this. We may learn from it,

1. That temporal prosperity is very unfavourable for spiritual advancement—

[Doubtless the facility with which Solomon could gratify all his natural appetites, rendered him the more easy prey to his own corruptions: and as his carnal gratifications increased, his spiritual affections would decay. And do we not find it thus in all ages? Adversity has been a source of benefit to thousands; but few have ever been permanently quickened by prosperity. If we look into the Church of God, we shall find innumerable instances of persons, who have suffered loss in their souls, in proportion as their wealth or honours have been increased: "The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things have choked the word, and

^m ver. 11.ⁿ ver. 12, 13.^o ver. 14, 23, 26—33.

rendered it unfruitful." The account given of Jeshurun^p contains the history of many; over whose tombs it might be inscribed, "The prosperity of fools destroys them^q."

Let us not then covet earthly gains or honours: they are but as "thick clay" around the feet of one that runneth in a race^r, or as a garment that obstructs the motion of his legs^s — — —]

2. That however advanced any man may be in age or piety, he is still in danger of falling—

[It is said of Solomon, that, "*when he was old*, his wives turned away his heart^t." Had it been in the days of his youth, we should have the less wondered at his folly; because versatility of mind is incident to that time of life: but after years of wisdom and piety, to turn in old age to such extreme folly and wickedness, what shall we say? Well may we exclaim, "Lord, what is man?" Can any thing speak more loudly to us than this? Can any thing more strongly enforce that warning of the Apostle, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall?" O "let us not be high-minded, but fear." "Let us fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into God's rest, any of us should seem to come short of it." This is certain, that, as our wickedness shall not be remembered if we truly turn from it, so "neither shall our righteousness be remembered if we turn from that." It is not he who "runs well for a season," but "he who endures unto the end, that shall be saved." If we turn back, at whatever period of our life it be, "we turn back unto perdition." Let all of us then cry to God, "to hold up our goings in his paths, that our footsteps slip not." Our motto to the last must be, "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe." To all then, whatever eminence they may have attained, I would say, as our Lord did to his disciples, not only "Remember Lot's wife," but, Remember the fall of Solomon.]

3. That smaller sins, if not guarded against in time, will issue in the greatest—

[Solomon might frame some excuse to himself for the sins in which his fall commenced: he worshipped on high places, *because the temple was not yet built*: he multiplied wives and concubines, *because his father had had several before him*: he procured much gold, and a multitude of horses, *because they would add to the splendour of his court, and perhaps also to his security*. But he found at last what a dangerous thing it is to tamper with sin, or to deviate knowingly even an hair's

^p Deut. xxxii. 15.

^q Prov. i. 32.

^r Hab. ii. 6.

^s Heb. xii. 1. ἐπιρίστατον ἁμαρτίαν.

^t ver. 4.

breadth from the divine commandments. Sin will soon blind the eyes, and harden the heart, and sear the conscience. Sin is a downward road, whereon, if we fall, our descent may soon be accelerated beyond a possibility of recovery. A leak may appear but a small thing; yet will it sink a ship, if left without timely repair. The voice of inspiration suggests to us, "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!" Let us not then account any sin small: let us watch and pray against every deviation from the divine commands: and, from a sense of our own blindness, let us pray to God, "Search thou me, and try me, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."]

4. That every sin we commit is aggravated by the mercies we have received—

[This, as has been observed, was intimated by God in the case of Solomon: and the universal voice of Scripture attests the same. "If our Lord had not come and spoken to the Jews, they had been comparatively without sin:" but his discourses and his miracles rendered them altogether without excuse; insomuch, that "it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment than for that generation." In like manner we are told, that the superior information of a servant who knows his Lord's will and does it not, will cause him to be beaten with more stripes, than he, whose ignorance forms some kind of plea for his neglect.

What then will be the state of us who have had such ample instruction, and such repeated warnings? If our minds have never been awakened, our misimprovement of the means of grace has involved us in the deeper guilt: but if the Lord has ever "manifested himself to us as he does not unto the world," and we have turned back from following him, our guilt is proportionably increased; so that "it would have been better for us never to have known the way of righteousness, than, having known it, to turn from it."]

CCCXXXVIII.

REVOLT OF THE TEN TRIBES.

1 Kings xii. 24. *This thing is from me.*

IN histories written by men, events are always traced to human efforts and sagacity; but in the inspired history every thing is traced to God. We always find, even in things apparently most contingent, a secret over-ruling Agent, accomplishing his

own purposes of mercy or of judgment, and operating with unerring wisdom to the production of his own ends. As "every good and perfect gift" is represented as "coming from above," so the prophet asks respecting things most calamitous, "Shall there be evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it?" In the account given us of the revolt of the ten tribes, and their establishment as a separate kingdom under Jeroboam, the proceedings of all the different parties appeared to spring wholly from themselves: but God says of the whole together, "This thing is from me." We will,

I. Confirm this assertion—

We will begin with stating what was "the thing" here referred to—

[After the death of Solomon, the different tribes assembled at Shechem, to acknowledge Rehoboam as his successor to the throne. But previous to their investing him with regal authority, they sought from him a promise that he would lighten their burthens, and redress their grievances. That they had been aggrieved and burthened in some degree, we may easily conceive; because the keeping of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, together with the building of temples for them all, and maintaining of worship for so many idols, in addition to all the expenses of his own government, must have necessitated Solomon to lay heavy taxes upon his subjects. But still the taxes were not such an intolerable grievance, when it is considered how much wealth Solomon had brought into the kingdom, and what peace and prosperity they had enjoyed during the whole of his reign. Had they complained of the licentiousness and idolatry which Solomon had introduced, and sought the removal of those great abuses, they would have acted well: but it was not about God's honour that they were concerned; they regarded nothing but their own interests: and, *like the generality of discontented patriots, they overlooked all the blessings they had enjoyed under his government, and were unreasonably clamorous about the taxes levied for its support.*

Rehoboam took three days to consider of the proposal; and by this delay he at once discovered his unwillingness to comply with their wishes, and gave them time to form and mature a conspiracy against him. He first consulted the old men, who had been his father's counsellors; but, not relishing their

^a Amos iii. 6.

sage advice, he consulted his own young companions; who recommended rather a system of intimidation: this was more congenial with his own pride; but it exasperated to the utmost those whom by conciliatory measures he might easily have won^b.

The event was such as might have been foreseen: the ten tribes would no longer acknowledge any allegiance to the house of David, but appointed a king of their own, even Jeroboam, whom they had sent for out of Egypt, to be an head, or centre of union to them, on the present emergency^c. The contemptuous way in which they spake of David was most ungrateful, seeing that his whole life had been spent in their service^d: but *past obligations* weigh but little with men irritated by a sense of *present injuries*.

The mode adopted to appease their minds, was no less absurd than the measure by which they had been incensed. Rehoboam sent Adoram, his tax-gatherer, the most obnoxious of all persons, to confer with them: but him they immediately stoned to death^e.

Rehoboam then fled to Jerusalem, and raised a large army of a hundred and eighty thousand men from among the two remaining tribes, to reduce the rebels by force: but God sent a prophet to him, and to the whole army, forbidding them to proceed, and declaring that the whole matter had been ordered by God himself: "Thus saith the Lord, Ye shall not go up nor fight against your brethren, the children of Israel: return every man to his own house; for *this thing is from me*."

That *this thing was from God*, we now proceed to shew—

[Hitherto nothing had appeared to be from God, except the sending of a prophet to declare his will respecting the prosecution of the war: but the whole was really of God, in its *rise*, its *progress*, and its *termination*.

From God it took *its rise*. On account of Solomon's transgressions, God declared to Solomon himself that HE *would rend* the ten tribes out of the hand of *his son*, and *give them to his servant*^f. He sent also a prophet to Jeroboam, to announce to him, by a very expressive emblem, that ten of the tribes should be taken from Solomon on account of his iniquities, and be *given to him*^g. These matters were well known to all Israel; for Solomon had on this account sought to kill Jeroboam^h; and constrained him to flee to Egypt for protection: and from thence had the ten tribes sent for him as soon as Solomon was

^b ver. 5—14.

^c ver. 2, 3.

^d ver. 16.

^e ver. 18.

^f 1 Kings xi. 11—13.

^g 1 Kings xi. 26—35.

^h 1 Kings xi. 40.

dead. Jeroboam was indeed of an ambitious turn of mind, particularly after he had been raised by Solomon from a low station to a place of great honour and authorityⁱ; but it was the declaration of God's purpose that called it forth into activity, and directed all the ten tribes to look to him as their future head.

Every step of *its progress* must also be traced to the same source. The complaints of the tribes, and the infatuation of the young monarch, might be supposed to originate wholly with themselves, and to spring entirely from the discontent of the one, and from the other's pride: and it is true, that God did not infuse these evil dispositions into their minds: but it is also true that he suffered these dispositions to rage, and the collision to arise, on purpose that he might accomplish his own purposes by them. This is expressly asserted in the history before us: "*The king hearkened not unto the people; for the cause was from the Lord, that he might perform his saying, which the Lord spake by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat*."^k

That *its termination* was from him is plainly declared in the words of our text; "*This thing* (from first to last) *is from me*:" and, that it was from him, he shewed, by constraining Rehoboam, and the whole army that he had raised, to acquiesce immediately in the loss they had sustained, and to rest satisfied with having all the other tribes for rivals and enemies, whom hitherto they had had for friends and brethren.

Now this kind of statement is by no means uncommon in the Holy Scriptures. God is often represented as overruling both men and devils for the accomplishment of his own purposes. God had determined to deliver the Amorites into the hand of Israel, though he would not deliver into their hand either Moab or Edom. Hence he influenced the minds of both the Moabites and Edomites to supply his people with food for money, that they might be spared; and equally influenced the minds of the Amorites to refuse that succour, that they might be destroyed^l. In like manner he left king Amaziah to disregard the warnings of the prophet, whom he had sent to remonstrate with him about his idolatries; "because God had determined to destroy him"^m. The agency of evil spirits is also sometimes called in for the same end. In the case of Ahab, a whole host of them were permitted of God to stimulate the false prophets to give such counsel to Ahab as should infallibly terminate in his ruinⁿ. In a word, the whole conspiracy of Jews and Gentiles against our blessed Lord, under the same infallible direction, accomplished in every particular,

ⁱ 1 Kings xi. 37.

^k ver. 15.

^l Deut. ii. 28—30.

^m 2 Chron. xxv. 14—16.

ⁿ 1 Kings xxii. 22, 23.

“what God’s hand and his counsel had determined before to be done^o.” The doctrine of our text therefore, though strange at first sight, is no other than what the Scriptures plainly and universally assert.]

Let us then proceed to,

II. Make some reflections upon it—

In contemplating Jehovah as he is represented in this place, we must of necessity observe,

1. How sovereign his power !

[God gave the kingdom to Saul; then rent it from him, and gave it to David and Solomon; then reduced it to two tribes only, in the hands of Rehoboam, giving the other ten to Jeroboam. In all this he acted sovereignly, disposing of it according to the counsel of his own will. And thus he does in all the kingdoms upon earth^p: “He doth according to his will in the armies of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou^q?” Nor is this true in reference to kingdoms only: he disposes equally of families and individuals; “He is the judge; he putteth down one, and setteth up another^r.”

How effectually does this consideration cut off all occasion for pride in those who are elevated, and for complaint in those that are debased! for as, on the one hand, “they who have received a gift can never reasonably boast as if they had not received it,” so, on the other hand, every sufferer must say, “I was still and opened not my mouth, because thou didst it.” Seeing then of what practical use this reflection is, let us recur to it on all occasions, for the humbling of our minds in prosperity, and the quieting of them in adversity.]

2. How mysterious his influence !

[In all the circumstances before mentioned, the different persons acted freely; and yet, as we have seen, were overruled by God in every step they took. How incomprehensible is this to our finite understandings! We know not how spirit acts upon matter; how then can we expect to know in what manner the Spirit of God acts upon our spirits! Yet if we know from experience that our own spirit does assuredly act upon our material body, we may be equally assured, upon the testimony of God, that there is a spiritual influence exercised by him upon the minds of his people. There is indeed a considerable difference between the mode in which that is exercised towards the godly, and the ungodly: in influencing the

^o Acts iv. 27, 28.

^q Dan. iv. 17, 35.

^p Dan. ii. 21.

^r Ps. lxxv. 7.

ungodly, he merely gives scope for the exercise of dispositions which already exist in their own minds; but, in influencing the godly, he first infuses holy dispositions into their minds, and then calls forth those dispositions into exercise by the operation of his own grace, exciting and strengthening the soul for the duties to which it is called.

Do we not then see, that God only is to be feared? that, if we secure his favour, not all the universe can hurt us? Let a Laban, or an Esau, come forth against us, God can restrain his rage^s, and make “the wrath of man to praise him:” or let an enraged army determine to destroy us, he can by a single word assuage their malice, and avert the storm. “The hearts of kings are in his hand as the rivers of water, and he turneth them whithersoever he will^t.” “If therefore God be for us, we may be sure that none can be against us.”]

3. How sure his word!

[In the instance before us it was fulfilled, notwithstanding all the parties strove to counteract it. The ten tribes would have submitted to Rehoboam's yoke, if only he had spoken kindly to them at first: they had no design in the first instance to separate from him. The advice of the young men was given with a view to keep the people in subjection by fear: and the determination of the army was to reduce them by force. Thus all endeavoured to preserve the kingdom entire; yet all were accessary to the division of it. Thus shall every word of God be fulfilled in its season. If that did not fail which depended, so to speak, on the voluntary actions of men, much less shall that which shall be executed by God alone. He has told us that “the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven;” but that “the wicked shall be turned into hell, with all the people that forget God:” and shall either of those declarations fall to the ground? No; not a jot or tittle of them shall ever fail. O that we may be wise, and learn to “tremble at the word of God,” whilst yet we may escape his threatenings, and secure the possession of his promised inheritance!]

^s Gen. xxxi. 29. and xxxiii. 1, 4.

^t Prov. xxi. 1. If this were a subject for the *Fifth of November*, it might here be shewn in what a mysterious way God preserved our nation from the plot that had been formed for its destruction.

CCCXXXIX.

JEROBOAM'S IDOLATRY REPROVED.

1 Kings xiii. 4. *And it came to pass, when King Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God, which had cried against the altar in Beth-el, that he put forth his hand from the*

altar, saying, Lay hold on him. And his hand, which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not pull it in again to him.

TO be raised to a situation of eminence and authority is generally thought a subject of congratulation: but if preferment be not accompanied with a proportionable increase of grace to fit us for it, it is rather to be dreaded than desired. Distinctions of every kind open a wider sphere for the exercise of our own corruptions, and too frequently become to the possessors of them an occasion of deeper condemnation. This is strongly illustrated in the case of Pharaoh, who was raised up to the throne of Egypt on purpose that he might have an opportunity of shewing all that was in his heart, and that God's power might be displayed and magnified in his destruction^a. In like manner Jeroboam was raised to the throne of Israel, not, alas! for any benefit either to himself or others, but for the ultimate augmentation of his own guilt and misery. Whilst in a humble situation, he was industrious, and trust-worthy^b: but when he was preferred to a higher post, he became ambitious^c, turbulent, rebellious^d: and when he was placed on the throne of Israel, he drew away that whole people to idolatry; and has from that hour been never mentioned but with abhorrence, as the man "that caused Israel to sin." In considering the account here given of him, we shall notice,

I. His unbelieving expedient—

Scarcely was Jeroboam raised to the throne, before he established idolatry throughout his dominions—

[Wishing to make the breach between Israel and Judah irreparable, he determined to cut off all intercourse between them; and to establish a worship of his own devising, that the people might not go up any longer to worship at Jerusalem. He knew that it would be in vain to prohibit religion altogether; but that to establish a false religion would be comparatively easy; since, if men have something wherewith to satisfy their own minds, they are not very scrupulous about inquiring

^a Rom. ix. 17.

^c 1 Kings x. 37.

^b 1 Kings xi. 28.

^d 2 Chron. xiii. 6.

what is agreeable to the mind of God. Having recently come out of Egypt, he introduced the idols that were there worshipped, even golden calves; and set them up in Dan, and Beth-el. One would have supposed that such an innovation would have shaken his throne to its foundation; but it seems to have created no uneasiness at all, nor to have produced one single remonstrance throughout the land. Do we not in this behold a true picture of human nature in every age and place? The worst of men must have some forms, by the observance of which they may satisfy their own consciences: but the easier and cheaper their religion is, the more suited it will be to their taste. To be told *they need not comply with the self-denying commands of God^e*, will be agreeable to their corrupt hearts: "Master, spare thyself," is to them a gratifying advice; and, wherever the Gospel is faithfully administered, the effect of this advice is clearly seen: the express commands of God oppose, in many instances, but a feeble barrier to the solicitations of carnal ease — — —]

To this he was instigated by unbelief—

[He was afraid lest his subjects, by going up to Jerusalem at the stated feasts, should be drawn away from him, and be induced to return to their former prince. Nor were these fears altogether groundless. The very exercises of religion would tend to convince them that they had sinned in casting off the yoke of Rehoboam; and the familiar intercourse which they would have with the other two tribes, would tend to reconcile their minds to the idea of being again united with them under one head. But Jeroboam was bound not to listen to any such considerations as these, because he had the express promise of God, that "his house should be built up, like the house of David^f," provided he would walk in the path of duty. This was a sufficient security to him, that the evil which he dreaded should never happen, whilst he remained faithful to his God. In God therefore he should have put his trust. But he gave way to unbelief, and sought for that in the violation of God's commands, which was only to be obtained in the observance of them; yea, he madly sought the establishment of his throne by the commission of those very crimes which had subverted the throne of Solomon. This is a weakness to which even the best of men have yielded on some occasions: the great father of the faithful himself repeatedly denied his wife through fear, as Isaac also did; and Jacob gained by deceit and falsehood the blessing, which he could not wait to receive in God's own time and way. But such unbelief, even in the smallest instances, is most sinful; and, in the instance before us, it

^e 1 Kings xii. 28.

^f 1 Kings xi. 38.

brought the curse of God upon that whole people. Let us therefore guard against its influence on our hearts; for its suggestions are always evil, and its effects are uniformly destructive — — —]

His conduct, when reproved for this device, leads us to consider,

II. His vindictive wrath—

A prophet was sent from Judah to reprove him—

[God had decreed that the utmost indignity should be offered to the altar at Beth-el, where Jeroboam was now officiating in his own person. He had appointed the priests, and sacrifices, together with the sacred feasts, without any reference to the divine commands, having “devised them of his own heart:” and now he was warned before all the people, that the very priests who offered their sacrifices upon it, should have their own bones burnt upon it by a prince of the house of David, whose name was Josiah. Now it is remarkable that no king of the house of David had a son named Josiah, for the space of three hundred years; and that then it was a wicked king who so named his son: so far was *man* from making any attempt to fulfil this prophecy. But God had ordained that such an one should in due time arise; and that he should execute what was now foretold: and, as a certain pledge of its ultimate accomplishment, the altar was miraculously rent in the very presence of Jeroboam, and “the ashes that were upon it were poured out^s.” This was humiliating to Jeroboam, not only on account of the indignity that should be offered to his altar, but because its being offered by one of the house of David was a pledge, that Judah should regain the ascendant, and thereby be enabled to execute the threatened judgments.]

This, instead of humbling him, incensed him in the highest degree—

[Instantly “he stretched out his hand to lay hold” on the prophet, determining probably to put him to death. Thus it is that the carnal heart is ever ready to rise against God. Men will insult God by every means in their power; yet, if reproved for it by a servant of the Most High, they account it an indignity, to be expiated only by the death of the offender. This was strongly exemplified in Jeremiah, and John the Baptist^h: and indeed in every company we go into, we see the hand stretched out by wicked men against every one that dares to advocate the cause of God — — — Not that the servants of God are on this account to refrain from bearing

^s ver. 3, 5.

^h Jer. xxvi. 7, 8, 11. Matt. xiv. 3—5, 10.

their testimony against iniquity: they must do so wherever they are, without fearing the face of man, or regarding any consequences that may come upon them.]

This rage of his brought on him, what we are next to consider,

III. His exemplary punishment—

God instantly smote his arm, so that he could not pull it in again to him—

[On many occasions has God vindicated the cause of his afflicted people, and shewn himself the avenger of their wrongs. Ahab menaced Micaiah; but God cut him off, according to Micaiah's word. Pashur smote Jeremiah, and put him in the stocks; but God "soon made him a terror to himselfⁱ." In truth, God regards every thing that is done against his people as done to himself. When Paul was persecuting the saints, the language of Jesus to him was, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou ME?" We do not indeed expect that God will often interpose in the visible manner that he did in the instance before us; but he will record every thing in the book of his remembrance, and requite every man according to his works. Then shall it be seen, that, however contemptible the saints may now appear, "it were better for a man to have a millstone hanged about his neck and be cast into the depths of the sea, than that he should offend one of those little ones who believe in Christ." "He that toucheth you," says God, "toucheth the apple of mine eye."]

Now was this proud persecutor constrained to ask for the prayers of him, whom he had just before endeavoured to destroy—

[Thus was Pharaoh reduced to seek the intercession of Moses: and thus are many amongst ourselves compelled in a season of adversity to desire the prayers of those very ministers, whom in time of prosperity they have reviled and persecuted. And happy will it be for those who find their error *now*, and have grace given them to repent of it: for assuredly they who will not humble themselves in this world, will be made monuments of God's wrath to all eternity.]

IMPROVEMENT—

1. Let nothing ever induce us to sin against God—

[The hope of preserving his temporal interests led Jeroboam into all his sins: and similar hopes are apt to produce

ⁱ Jer. xx. 2—4.

the like baneful influence on us. But, supposing we should succeed, what can repay us for the loss of the divine favour? To adhere with steadfastness to the path of duty is our truest wisdom. Whilst faithfully serving God, we may safely leave events in his hands. If we suffer for well doing, we may console ourselves with this reflection, that to lose by virtue is infinitely better than to gain by sin. Our losses will be soon made up in the eternal world; but our gains will terminate in everlasting woe.]

2. If we have sinned at any time, let us be thankful for reproof—

[How thankful should Jeroboam have been to the prophet, who at the peril of his life declared the unalterable purpose of his God! So should all be who are reproofed for sin. It is no pleasing task to denounce the judgments of God against sin or sinners: but it is necessary: and it is at the peril of his own soul, if the watchman forget to warn the citizens of their approaching danger. A necessity is laid upon God's ministers; and woe be to them, if they neglect their duty! Let reproof then be ever welcome to you; and let all watch over each other with tender love, and inflexible fidelity.]

CCCXL.

THE DISOBEDIENT PROPHET SLAIN.

1 Kings xiii. 26. *And when the prophet that brought him back from the way heard thereof, he said, It is the man of God, who was disobedient unto the word of the Lord: therefore the Lord hath delivered him unto the lion, which hath torn him, and slain him, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake unto him.*

IT not unfrequently happens, that they who are enabled to maintain their steadfastness in more arduous circumstances, are surprised and overcome in situations of less difficulty. Noah and Lot, whilst living in the midst of ungodly men, were circumspect and exemplary in the highest degree; but when freed from those restraints, and enjoying repose in the bosom of their families, they fell, and greatly dishonoured their profession. The case of the disobedient prophet was not indeed to be compared with theirs in point of enormity: but, in withstanding

greater temptations, and falling when his victory appeared complete, he exhibits another instance of human instability. Much indeed is to be said for him, because he was deceived: but his history affords a solemn warning unto all. In illustration of it we shall consider,

I. The character of the seducer—

Many have thought him to be a pious man: and certainly there are many features in his character which have a favourable aspect. He is called “an old prophet,” which intimates that God had made use of him in revealing his will to men. He expressed a very high regard for the prophet that came out of Egypt, and, with considerable trouble to himself, sought to enjoy communion with him. Beyond a doubt he was at that time inspired of God, because he confirmed with divine authority the prediction that had been delivered, respecting the burning of men’s bones on Jeroboam’s altar; an event that did not take place till after the expiration of three hundred years. When he heard that the prophet whom he had deceived was dead, he went boldly, and as it were in faith, up to the very face of the lion, and took away from him the corpse, and returned with it to his own house. For the loss of so good a man he greatly mourned; and he determined to honour him to the utmost of his power. He interred his body in his own tomb; he wrote an inscription over it to commemorate his fidelity, and to record the prophecy he had delivered; (which, considering the offence it might give to Jeroboam, was no small instance of holy zeal:) and finally, he desired that his bones might be laid by the side of that pious man, to intimate, that he desired to have his portion with him at the resurrection of the just.

As to the deceit practised by him to obtain the society of that godly man, it may be said, that, though wrong in itself, it proceeded from love, and was a kind of pious fraud, for the obtaining of a privilege he could not otherwise enjoy.

But after all, if we candidly consider the other parts of his character, we cannot but pronounce him a wicked man. For,

1. He forbore to testify against the sin of others—

[That he was a prophet, there is no doubt, even as Balaam had been before him. But to what purpose was he endued with a spirit of prophecy, if not to exert himself in reproving sin, and in maintaining the cause of God in the world? Was that a time to be silent, when idolatry was being established throughout the land, and God himself was set aside as no longer worthy of men's regard? When God had set him there as a light, was he to put his light under a bushel? Should he not rather have "raised his voice on high, and shewn the house of Israel their transgressions?" Yet, behold, no testimony did he bear against the reigning abominations: he was "a dumb dog that could not bark, sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber^a." Methinks, if God had ever enjoined him to be silent, (as on some occasions he has done^b,) his experience should have accorded with that of Jeremiah, who tells us, that "God's word was in his heart as a burning fire shut up in his bones, inso-much that he was weary with forbearing, and could not stay^c." But no such feelings had he: he was content to let all go on their own way, provided he might but enjoy his ease: and therefore he was no better than an idol shepherd, against whom are denounced the heaviest woes^d. The watchman that omits to give warning of the approaching enemy, and the shepherd that careth not for his flock, are among the most faulty of characters, and the most injurious of mankind^e— —]

2. He countenanced sin in his own children—

[Every parent is bound to "bring up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord:" and every good man can have that testimony from God which Abraham had, "I know him, that he will command his children, and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord^f." But how did this prophet act? Did he restrain his sons? Did he insist that they should "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them^g?" No: when they had attended the idolatrous service, they came home and told every thing to their father, assured that they should meet with no rebuke from him, nor receive at his hands any testimony of his displeasure. What pretensions then could he have to

^a Isai. lvi. 10, 11.

^b Ezek. iii. 26.

^c Jer. xx. 9.

^d Zech. xi. 17.

^e Ezek. xxxiii. 1—9. and xxxiv. 1—10.

^f Gen. xviii. 19.

^g Eph. v. 11.

piety? Eli had reproved the impieties of his sons; yet, because he had not authoritatively interposed to prevent or punish their abominations, God visited him with a very signal judgment. How reprehensible then must this prophet have been, who both connived at, and consented to, a crime, for which he was bound by the law to put even his own children to death^h! Let parents know, that if, by neglecting to “provide for their own household they deny the faith and become worse than infidels,” much more must they incur the heaviest guilt by neglecting to provide for their eternal interests — — —]

3. He even tempted another to the commission of sin—

[Here his conduct was most wanton and cruel. He knew how steadfastly the man of God had resisted every temptation, and had withstood every inducement either of hope or fear; and behold, he calls falsehood to his aid, and pretends to a divine commission, in order that he may prevail to divert the holy man from his purpose, and to involve him in sin. Nor do we find that, when he was inspired to denounce the judgments of God against him for his transgression, he ever humbled himself, or implored pardon for his offence: methinks, the least he could have done would have been to intercede with God, as David did for his suffering people, “Let thy hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father’s house, and not against this poor man whom I have deceivedⁱ.” but he felt no such compunction, notwithstanding the enormity of his offence. Unhappy he, who was thus led to offend! But unhappier far that wicked man, who cast the stumbling-block before him^k! He probably thought it but a light matter to deceive a person in so small a point as this: but, if to tempt a Nazarite with wine was no light sin^l, neither could this be light, “where the guilt of falsehood and blasphemy was superadded to that of causing his brother to offend.”]

The success of the seducer leads us next to contemplate,

II. The fate of the seduced—

There our proud hearts are almost ready to sit in judgment upon God. But “his ways are in the deep;” “neither giveth he account of any of his matters:” and whether we discern the equity of his dispensations or not, it becomes us to silence every murmuring thought with this, “Shall not the Judge of all the

^h Deut. xiii. 6—9.

ⁱ 2 Sam. xxiv. 17.

^k Matt. xviii. 7.

^l Amos ii. 12.

earth do right?" Certainly we cannot but compassionate the fate of the unhappy man, when we see him falling a victim to the divine displeasure: nevertheless we derive from it much important instruction. The judgment inflicted on him shews us,

1. That no command of God is to be trifled with—

[The command not to eat bread or drink water in that place might appear small; but, however small in itself, it was sanctioned by the same authority as the greatest. That there are degrees of importance in a moral view between one command and another, is certain: but as bearing the stamp of divine authority, all are alike, and to be regarded by us with equal reverence^m. Our Lord informs us, that "whoso shall break one of the least of his commandments, and teach men so, shall be called the least in the kingdom of heavenⁿ," or, as that expression seems to import, be the furthest from it. Accordingly we find in Scripture very heavy judgments inflicted for, what might be considered, very small offences: the man who gathered sticks upon the Sabbath-day was stoned to death by God's express command: and Uzzah, who stretched forth his hand to support the tottering ark, was "struck dead for his error." Let us therefore not presume to violate any commandment under the idea of its being but a small command, or a venial offence: for we behold in the instance before us, that God is "a jealous God," and will vindicate the honour of his insulted law.]

2. That the more nearly we are related to God, the more aggravated is every sin that we commit against him—

[It might have been hoped, that so small a sin, committed so inadvertently, by one who was actively engaged in God's service, might have passed unnoticed: but, on the contrary, he was punished, whilst the idolatry of Jeroboam, and the impiety of the old prophet, were overlooked. But God has taught us that "judgment shall begin at the house of God^o;" and that the more distinguished we have been by his unmerited favours, the more certainly shall our transgressions be visited upon us^p. Of this we have a most remarkable instance in the case of Moses, who for one inadvertent word was excluded from the land of Canaan; nor could any entreaties of Moses get the sentence reversed. Let us not then presume upon our relation to God, or upon the mercies we have received from him, but rather be the more fearful of offending him, in proportion to the kindness he has exercised towards us.]

^m Jam. ii. 11. ⁿ Matt. v. 19. ^o Ezek. ix. 6. ^p Amos iii. 2.

3. That there is a time coming, when the present inequalities of the divine dispensations shall be rectified—

[The sight of such lenity exercised towards the two great offenders, and such apparent severity towards this holy man, naturally leads our minds forward to a day of future retribution, when rewards and punishments shall be dispensed with impartial justice and unerring wisdom. At present, the saints are “chastened; but it is that they may not be condemned with the world:” whereas the ungodly are in many instances unpunished; but “are reserved unto the day of judgment to be punished;” being left in the mean time to fill up the measure of their iniquities, and to “treasure up wrath against the day of wrath.” Whatever therefore may now appear inexplicable to us, let us wait to have it cleared up at that day, when the whole assembled universe shall confess, “True and righteous are thy judgments, Lord God Almighty⁹.”]

From this subject we will take occasion to suggest some useful ADVICE—

1. Guard against conforming to the world—

[This holy prophet was forbidden to eat bread or drink water in that idolatrous land, or even to return by the way that he came into it: and this was to shew the people that he would not have the smallest communion with them, or any acquaintance with their ways. The same *precise conduct* is not enjoined to us, nor indeed would it be practicable; for then, as the Apostle says, “we must needs go out of the world.” But the *spirit of* that conduct must be found in us: we must “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.” We are commanded to “come out of the world, and be separate, and not to touch the unclean thing:” and the reason of this injunction is assigned to us, namely, that “the believer can no more have communion with the unbeliever than light with darkness, or Christ with Belial.” And our Lord constantly characterizes his followers in this way, “They are not of the world, *even as I am not of the world.*” Let us remember then that we are merely sent here for a little time to fulfil the particular duties assigned us, and that our home and our rest are in a better world.]

2. Be careful whom you select for your acquaintance—

[As we are not to select our friends from among the openly profane, so must we be careful whom we confide in even among

⁹ Rev. xvi. 7.

the religious world. It is not every person that makes a profession of religion who will make a profitable companion. There are many who "have a name to live, and yet are dead;" and many "profess that they know God, but in works deny him." St. John cautions us well on this head: "Brethren, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; for many false prophets are gone out into the world." Had the good prophet inquired into the character of the old prophet, instead of giving implicit credit to his professions, he would not have fallen. And it is a melancholy fact, that multitudes of simple-hearted and godly Christians are essentially injured by their hypocritical associates. We would earnestly advise, therefore, all young Christians to be on their guard, and to take those only for their confidential friends, whose lives they have found to correspond with their professions.]

3. Let the word of God be the only rule of your conduct—

[The man of God had not the same evidence for the reversal of the command, that he had for the command itself: he was wrong therefore in giving such implicit credit to a stranger, whatever his character or professions might be. And is it not wrong in us to suffer the assertions of men, whatever their general character may be, to supersede the express declarations of God himself? Who amongst us has not heard a thousand times from human authority, that God does not command this or that; and that such strictness is not required of us? But we have an infallible standard by which we should try every sentiment that is proposed to us: "To the law, and to the testimony: if men speak not according to this word, there is no light in them." Having "the sure testimony of God, we shall do well to take heed to it," with jealous vigilance, undeviating constancy, and unabated firmness.]

^r 1 John iv. 1.

^s Rom. xvi. 18.

CCCXLI.

ABIJAH'S PIETY REWARDED.

1 Kings xiv. 13. *He only of Jeroboam shall come to the grave, because in him there is found some good thing toward the Lord God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam.*

MEN most addicted to wickedness, or most confident in their avowal of infidelity, no sooner come into circumstances of great affliction, than they feel the weakness of their principles, and their need of

other supports than any they have yet experienced. In such seasons they secretly begin to see the value of that faith and piety, which they have been wont to deride. No man ever appeared more confident in his iniquities than Jeroboam; yet, when he was in deep affliction on account of the dangerous illness of his son Abijah, to whom did he go? to his idols? No; he knew that "an idol was nothing in the world." Did he send for those whom he had constituted his priests? No; he expected no good whatever from them. But there was in the land a prophet of the Lord, even that very prophet, who, many years before, had been sent to declare to him his destined elevation to the throne of Israel. To him he sends in his affliction, even to him whom hitherto he had neglected and despised. But, ashamed to have his sentiments known, he will not go himself; nor will he send a servant, lest he should be betrayed: he therefore sends his wife, who, on the one hand, was as deeply concerned as himself about the issue of his son's illness; and, on the other hand, was equally concerned to preserve an appearance of consistency in his conduct: her therefore he sends in disguise, that he may at once obtain the information he desires, and prevent the discovery which he fears. Unhappy and foolish man! What favour could he expect from God, when he was seeking him in such a way; when he did not even ask for any spiritual blessing, or desire to be instructed how to obtain one, but sought merely relief from a state of painful suspense? The answer was such as he might well expect; namely, that his unparalleled iniquities should be visited on him, and on his whole family. Respecting the son about whom he was so anxious, there was some exception: all the rest should die unlamented, and be devoured by birds and beasts; but *he* should come to the grave, because there was in him "some good thing towards the Lord God of Israel."

We propose, in considering what is here said of young Abijah, to notice,

I. His commendation—

This appears at first sight exceeding low : and so indeed it is, if compared with a more advanced state of religion, even as an infant appears scarcely worthy of consideration, when compared with a person of mature age : but if compared, as it ought to be, with a state of spiritual death, it is really great, and worthy, if we may so speak, of the notice taken of it. Consider it,

1. As it was in itself—

[The state of a natural man is that of “enmity against God^a.” Now though the state of Abijah was the lowest that could consist with real piety, yet was it worthy of commendation when compared with that. There was certainly in Abijah a disapprobation of the reigning idolatry : there was also a sincere desire after God’s favour, and a secret purpose, if ever it should be in his power, to check the prevailing abominations. Less than this could not consist with sincerity of heart : and more than this does not appear to have manifested itself in him. But this involved in it a change of heart : this was a fruit of divine grace, and formed the first lineaments of the divine image on the soul : and hence it was that God so noticed and approved it.]

2. As existing under his peculiar circumstances—

[He was a *young man*, and at a time of life when contrary dispositions most generally prevail. This therefore rendered it the more pleasing to God, who, as the Father of his whole family, loves “the new-born babes” as truly, if not as ardently, as those who have attained to riper years. Besides, he was a youth of *high distinction*, the son of a king. Now, though “God is no respecter of persons,” but loves the poor as well as the rich, yet, inasmuch as the maintenance of holy principles is far more difficult in high life than it is in a humbler sphere, he approves most eminently that, which exerts itself under circumstances of greatest difficulty. Above all, he cultivated holy principles in a family and a nation sunk in all manner of iniquity. Now to withstand such a torrent, and to exhibit even the feeblest light in a place of such gross darkness, was a most honourable distinction ; and it rendered him, who in another situation would have been undeserving of notice, a proper object of God’s approbation.

In this view his character is peculiarly deserving the attention of the young, and especially of those in the higher circles of life, and in places where impiety abounds : and happy will

^a Rom. viii. 7.

they be who have grace to seek such a distinction as his, and courage to maintain it — — —]

Small as his stature was in grace, he, even in this world, met with,

II. His reward—

The reward bestowed on him seems, like his attainments, of little value; for, as the body is insensible after death, and the soul is unconscious either of the honours that may be paid to the mortal frame, or the indignities it may suffer, it seems to signify very little, whether our body be committed to the grave, or be devoured by beasts. But there is in all of us a desire to have the customary respect paid to our body, after the departure of the soul from it: and, if we knew beforehand that after death it would be treated with all manner of indignities, we should feel life itself considerably embittered to us: we may therefore regard the distinction conferred on young Abijah, as of great value; more especially as it was intended to express the divine approbation of him, in opposition to the displeasure exercised towards his offending family. In this, at all events, it was of great use, in that it served to shew,

1. That God loveth piety wherever he beholds it—

[God himself is not only holy, but “The Holy One;” and wherever he beholds his own image, he delights in it. There is not a grace without some appropriate expression of God’s high regard for it. The poor, the meek, the contrite have all their peculiar promises, and are represented as possessing “ornaments, which in the sight of God are of great price” — — — and such is the estimation in which he beholds these dispositions, that he looks with peculiar complacency upon every person in whom they are found; nor can all the glorious angels around his throne divert his attention from them; yea rather, the angels themselves participate the pleasure, and derive new joys, even in the very presence of their God, from such a sight^b.]

2. That he will reward it, wherever it is found in the lowest degree—

^b Isai. lxvi. 2. Luke xv. 10.

[When God himself asks, "Who hath despised the day of small things^c?" we may be sure that he himself does not. The smallest gift to a person for his sake, even "a cup of cold water, shall not lose its reward." In like manner the silent thoughts of the heart are noticed by him with a view to their ultimate reward. The prophet tells us that not only they who spoke one to another, but they also "who thought upon his name," had their thoughts recorded in the "book of his remembrance, and were to be his, in the day that he should count up his jewels^d." Nor can we doubt but that David's desire to build the temple was as much accepted of God, and as liberally rewarded also, as was the actual raising of the edifice by Solomon.]

ADDRESS—

1. Those in whom there is no good thing towards the Lord God of Israel—

[Jeroboam's family bore the name of Israelites, as we do of Christians; yet was there only one among them that had *any* good thing in him. And is not this the state of many individuals at least, if not of families, amongst us? How many are there who feel no concern about the iniquities of the land, no desire after God in their own souls, and no purpose ever to exert themselves in his sacred cause! — — — What then can such persons expect at the hands of God? What, but to be made monuments of his heavy displeasure? O that we would consider what his Prophets and Apostles have spoken respecting such characters, and that we would seek for mercy ere it be too late!]

2. Those in whom it is doubtful whether there be any good thing or not—

[There frequently are found some transient motions in the heart, like those in the stony-ground hearers, which yet are not regarded by God as good, because they have no solid principle as their foundation. And from hence arises a considerable difficulty in judging of our real state: our self-love is apt to flatter and deceive us. But let us remember that God "searcheth the heart and trieth the reins:" he "discerneth the thoughts and intents of the heart:" yea, he "weigheth the spirits," and that too with such exactness as enables him to ascertain with infallible certainty whether there be in them the smallest measure of solid good. Let us fear lest we deceive our own souls, and lest, after all our favourable appearances, "our religion at last be found vain^e." It is "by the fruits

^c Zech. iv. 10.

^d Mal. iii. 16, 17.

^e Jam. i. 26.

alone that the tree can be known," and that we can ascertain with comfort to ourselves, that "the root of the matter is found in us^f."]

3. Those in whom there is evidently some good thing—

[Rejoice, and give glory to "God, who hath begun a good work in you." But do not rest satisfied with any attainments. Have you reason to hope that you are "as new-born babes?" then "desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby." Whereinsoever you have hitherto done well, seek to "abound more and more;" and let it be your daily endeavour so to "grow up into Christ in all things as your living Head," that you may "come to a perfect man," even to "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."]

^f Job xix. 28.

CCCXLII.

ELIJAH AND THE WIDOW OF SAREPTA.

1 Kings xvii. 15, 16. *And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah.*

MUCH as temporal calamities are to be dreaded and deprecated, there are occasions whereon a pious man may desire, and even pray for, the infliction of them upon his fellow-creatures. As St. Paul "delivered an offender unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus," so we may wish for some divine interposition to arrest sinners in their course, and to bring them to a sense of their guilt and danger. It was in this view that Elijah prayed for a famine that should correct and reclaim the whole nation of Israel: and, when he had obtained from God an assurance that the judgment should be inflicted upon them, and never be reversed but in answer to his prayers, he boldly warned Ahab of the impending calamity, advertising him for what end it would be sent, and how it was to be improved for the nation's

good^a. As for himself, in obedience to the divine direction, he retired to the brook Cherith, and was for a long time supported there by ravens, which brought him bread and meat regularly twice a day: and, when that brook was dried up, he went to Zarephath, or Sarepta, which belonged to Sidon, and was there nourished by a widow woman, whom God had appointed to sustain him. Thus, whilst the iniquities of the nation were severely punished, the care which God takes of his obedient servants was the more signally manifested.

The account given us of his abode with the Sidonian widow is very interesting, inasmuch as it displays the unbounded goodness of God to her in return for her kindness towards his faithful servant. Let us consider,

I. Her work—

Elijah going, as he was commanded, to the city of Zarephath, found the widow gathering a few sticks for the purpose of dressing the last remnant of provision that remained to her for herself and her son: and after soliciting a draught of water, he requested her to give him a morsel of bread. This led to a disclosure of the circumstances in which she was: but he assured her, that she need not fear; for that God would so multiply her little store, that it should never be exhausted till after the famine should have ceased. On this occasion we behold,

1. The extent of her liberality—

[Having but a sufficiency for a single meal for herself and her son, and having no prospect whatever of obtaining from man any further supply, she imparted to this stranger a portion of her provision, and dressed it with her own hands on purpose for him. Perhaps since the foundation of the world there never was so striking an illustration of the character given many centuries afterwards to the Macedonian churches; of whom it is said, that, “in a great trial of affliction, their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality^b.” We admire, and justly too, the astonishing liberality of the widow in the Gospel, who, possessing only two mites, cast

^a Compare ver. 1. with Jam. v. 17, 18.

^b 2 Cor. viii. 2.

them both into the treasury: but great as that was, it by no means equalled that which is recorded in our text: for the widow who gave her two mites, had herself only to support; whereas the other widow had a son also: and, though the widow with her two mites knew not where to obtain more, yet there was no general pressure at that time and place; so that her neighbours, if willing, were able to supply her wants; whereas the other widow was surrounded by those only who were involved in the same calamity with herself; and consequently could hope for no relief whatever; since, however her neighbours might have the inclination, they had not the ability, to relieve her. Well therefore may this act of the Sidonian widow be “published, (as that of the Jewish widow is,) through the whole world, as a memorial of her.”]

2. The strength of her faith—

[Though a Gentile woman, she may well be called a daughter of Abraham; for she very closely walked in the steps of Abraham^c. The declaration made to her as from God was made by a perfect stranger, and was unsupported by any miracle; yet was it made the ground of action by her without a moment's hesitation: we may say of her therefore, as of Abraham, She “staggered not at the promises of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded, that what He had promised, he was able to perform^d.”]

Let us now contemplate,

II. Her reward—

Richly was she repaid for this act of faith and love—

[“Her barrel of meal wasted not, nor did her cruse of oil fail,” for the space of two years, during which time the prophet and herself and family were supported by them. We behold in the common course of providence, seed producing “thirty, sixty, and even an hundred-fold:” but never was there seen, either before or since, such an harvest as this. But truly, if “God is known by the judgments that he executeth,” so is he also by the gifts that he bestoweth. He has said, that “what we give to the poor, we lend unto the Lord; and that whatsoever we lay out, he will repay us again:” but, in the instance before us, “the handful of corn sprang up as the woods of Lebanon.”]

This fitly represents what shall be done in the eternal world—

^c Rom. iv. 12.

^d Rom. iv. 20, 21.

[There will be a proportion between the works of men and their reward, so far, that the more we have done for the Lord the more we shall receive from him, reaping sparingly or bountifully according as we have sown^e. But what proportion exists between any work of ours, and the lowest reward that can be conferred in heaven? Surely none: a whole life spent in the service of God is nothing when compared with an eternity of bliss. We need not however doubt on this account the certainty of God's promises; but rather may enlarge our expectations to the utmost extent of them, assured, that in the accomplishment of them our most sanguine hopes shall be more than realized.

But let us never forget what it is that God has promised to reward; it is *the obedience of faith*. Had the widow bargained, as it were, to receive a recompence for her provisions, she never could have hoped for such a return as she received: but when she gave freely for the Lord's sake, and cast herself wholly upon him, then God esteemed nothing too great to confer upon her. So, if we would purchase heaven by our works, we shall in vain look for such blessedness: but if in a way of holy self-denial we will consecrate all that we are and have unto the Lord, for the exalting of his name, then will God load us with his richest benefits both in time and in eternity.

Let not any one say, "This mercy may be shewn to others, but not to *me*:" for God is sovereign in the distribution of his gifts; and, if he has already given us a desire to serve him, he will infallibly recompense our services in a better world. The widow of Sarepta was a Gentile: yet, as our Lord told the Jews, was Elijah sent to her, whilst all the widows that were in Israel were passed by^f. In like manner may God send his blessings to *us*, however far we are off from him; yea he may send them to us in preference to those who appear more likely to obtain them. This to a proud Pharisee is an offensive truth^g: but to a humble penitent it is replete with comfort. Let us only attend to his word, and it shall be well with us: "Believe in the Lord, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper^h."]

^e 2 Cor. ix. 6.

^f Luke iv. 25, 26.

^g Luke iv. 28, 29.

^h 2 Chron. xx. 20.

CCCXLIII.

THE WIDOW'S SON RAISED BY ELIJAH.

1 Kings xvii. 22, 23. *And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down*

out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, See, thy son liveth.

THOUGH God was pleased to separate for himself a peculiar people, to whom alone he communicated the knowledge of his will, he gave frequent intimations to them, that his mercy should in due time be extended unto the Gentiles also. The history of the Sidonian widow was particularly noticed in that view by our Lord himself. In his first sermon at Nazareth, he warned the Jews, that they must not rest in their outward privileges, since, if they walked unworthy of them, God would again, as he had frequently done before, transfer to the Gentiles those blessings to which they foolishly supposed themselves exclusively entitled^a. The peculiar mercy referred to by him is that which we have already considered, the feeding of her by miracle during the years of famine, whilst no such mercy was vouchsafed to any widow in Israel. But in our text we are informed of another mercy which she received, and which was the first of the kind that was ever vouchsafed to any child of man, namely, the restoring of her son to life. In bringing this part of her history before you, we shall distinctly notice,

I. Her trouble—

She had lost her son, her only son. This was a very heavy affliction to her: it would be so to any parent; but it was more especially so to her, because she had previously been reduced to widowhood, and therefore had none to be the support and comfort of her declining years. In him all her affections were centered, and with him all her hopes were destroyed. But the affliction was the heavier, because,

1. It was unexpected—

[Two years before, when she thought her child near to death, she spoke of it with the most perfect composure^b: but now her distress and sorrow were exceeding great: on the former occasion she saw her little provision gradually consuming, and death advancing with rapid strides; and therefore

^a Luke iv. 25—27.

^b ver. 12.

her mind was prepared for the event: but here the event was so sudden that she had not time even to go to the prophet, and desire his intercessions in her behalf: hence the stroke was almost insupportable; and made her even reflect upon the prophet, as though he had occasioned her calamity.]

2. It was singular—

[Had the calamity been general, she had found some consolation in the thought that she suffered nothing but what was common to those around her. We doubt not but that this consideration rendered the famine more supportable to each individual than it would have been if the calamity had been peculiar to himself. In like manner, if she had found many other widows despoiled of their children like herself, her sympathy with others would have lessened her grief on her own account. But no such consolatory thought was left for her: she seemed to be singled out to bear her burthen alone.]

3. It was, in her apprehension, penal—

[This adds a ten-fold weight to any calamity which we are called to suffer: the wrath of God is the bitterest ingredient that can be infused into any cup. Hence was her grief so different from that which she had manifested on the former occasion: she regarded her calamity as a judgment sent from God. She knew that the famine had been sent for the wickedness of Israel, in answer to Elijah's prayers; she thought therefore that this affliction had been sent to her by the same means, and on the same account, namely, for some transgressions she had committed previous to his visit, or for some which he had seen during his continuance with her. And here we may observe, that this is a view in which afflictions readily appear to a humble mind. A person truly humbled, is jealous of himself, and apt to fear that he has offended God: and whilst an affliction regarded as a paternal chastisement, would be borne by him with grateful submission, the same, as a vindictive judgment, would utterly overwhelm him. To this consideration chiefly we ascribe the impatience that was manifested in the widow's address to the prophet on this occasion: she spoke, not the result of her deliberate judgment, but the hasty dictate of an oppressed mind.]

Let us now turn our attention to,

II. Her deliverance—

The prophet, animated by the highest and best of principles, overlooked her unjust reflections; and, filled with tenderest sympathy, took the child out of her bosom, and carried it to his chamber, and laid

it on his own bed, and, as though he would have infused life into him out of his own body, thrice stretched himself upon the corpse; and, after crying earnestly to the Lord in behalf of the child, restored him back again to the mother a living child. This was a wonderful deliverance to the afflicted mother: let us notice,

1. How it was wrought—

[It were absurd to imagine, though some have been guilty of the absurdity, that the animal warmth of the prophet had any efficacy towards restoring a dead corpse to life: it was by prayer alone that he prevailed. He begins with an humble expostulation with the Deity; not as though he thought the stroke unjust, but as fearing lest the enemies of Jehovah should take occasion from it to represent him as a hard master, whom it was in vain, and even dangerous, to serve. Such was the expostulation which Moses offered, when God had threatened to destroy the whole Jewish nation^c: and no doubt, when dictated solely by a concern for the honour of the Deity, it is highly pleasing unto God; as its prevalence on this occasion fully proved. Next, he offers a petition, such as never had been before offered: “O Lord, my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again!” What a wonderful petition! How presumptuous does it at first sight appear! But it is our misfortune and our fault that we are not more enlarged in our petitions at the throne of grace. I mean not to say, that *we* are authorized to ask for such an exertion of Omnipotence as this; but this I say, that “we are not straitened in God, but are straitened in our own bowels;” and that that is the true reason of our receiving so little from God. However “wide we might open our mouths, God would fill them,” provided we asked in faith, and according to his will. Great as the petition was, God answered it in its utmost extent, and enabled the prophet to present to the widow her child restored to life.]

2. How it was received—

[We may in some measure conceive the joy that would pervade the minds both of him who had obtained the blessing, and of her who received it. But the effect which the deliverance produced in enlarging her knowledge and confirming her faith, is that which particularly calls for our attention. Her trial had so discomposed her mind as for a moment to shake her faith in God. ‘How can this be the true God, who, after all his mercies to me, afflicts me thus? and how can this be a man

^c Numb. xiv. 13—16.

of God, who makes me such a recompence for all my attention to him?' Nor let us wonder that a poor Gentile was thus shaken in her faith, when a similar effect was produced by an unexpected trial on one of the most distinguished servants of the Lord. Joshua, on the discomfiture of Israel before Ai, and the loss of about six and thirty men, actually expressed more than this poor widow even ventured to imagine^d. Indeed this is the common fruit of affliction on our impatient minds: we are ready to ask, "Is the Lord among us, or not^e?" But the manifestation of God's power and mercy dispelled the cloud, and led her to confess him as a gracious and faithful God. This was the effect produced on Moses after the passage of Israel through the Red Sea^f: and it is the proper effect to be produced on all.]

Let us LEARN then from this history,

1. How to interpret providences—

[We are apt to listen to sense rather than to faith, and to say, "All these things are against me." But how can they be really *against* us, when God has promised, that all things shall work together for our *good*. Against us they may be *in some points of view*; but they shall be for us *on the whole*. With what abundant benefit did this widow receive her child again! It is needless to repeat the benefits which Jacob ultimately received from the dispensation which he regarded as so calamitous. You all "know also *the end* of the Lord" in reference to Job, how abundantly his happiness was increased after his afflictions^g. It may be that your *temporal* happiness may not be increased; but the loss of it shall be more than counterbalanced by your *spiritual* prosperity. What our Lord said respecting Lazarus, may be justly applied to every afflictive dispensation; "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby^h:" and the reproof which our Lord afterwards gave to Martha, may justly be given to most of us; "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of Godⁱ?" Let us learn to regard afflictions as blessings in disguise; and let it be our endeavour to walk more by faith and less by sight; according to that direction of the prophet, "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God^k." If the dispensation be impe-

^d Josh. vii. 7—9.

^e Exod. xvii. 7.

^f Exod. xv. 11.

^g Jam. v. 11.

^h John xi. 4.

ⁱ John xi. 40.

^k Isai. l. 10.

netrably dark, let it then suffice us to know, that “what we know not now, we shall know hereafter.”]

2. How to improve them—

[Every leaf in the book of providence is full of instruction respecting the perfections of our God. O what might we not learn of his wisdom, his power, his love, his faithfulness, if we were observant of his dispensations towards us? Many a time should we exclaim with the widow, “Now I *know* that his word is true;” I do not take it upon trust; I *see* it, I *know* it; and am ready to *attest* it before the whole universe. This is the kind of evidence which Job had, when he said, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee.” A small measure of such experience as this is of unbounded value. If it were only for our own comfort, we should cultivate it to the uttermost; but it is of unspeakable benefit to those around us, inasmuch as it encourages them also to trust in God. See how David represents this when emerging out of temporal affliction; “Many shall see it,” says he, “and fear, and shall trust in the Lord¹,” and again, when brought up from the depths of spiritual trouble; “For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found^m.” The knowledge which we have of God and of Christ is mere theory, till we have learned the same by our own personal experience; but when our faith is confirmed by actual experience, then it is as convincing as sight itself. O that we may all aspire after this knowledge, and improve every dispensation for the attainment of it! then will it be to us a source of unclouded peace, and prepare us for that blessed place, where faith shall be lost in sight, and hope in enjoyment.]

¹ Ps. xl. 1—4.

^m Ps. xxxii. 3—6.

CCCXLIV.

OBADIAH'S EARLY PIETY.

1 Kings xviii. 12. *I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth.*

IT is comfortable to reflect, that in the worst of times there are some who fear God, and that the state of religion is rarely so bad as it appears. The days of Ahab were peculiarly unfavourable to the existence of real piety in Israel: for, in addition to that king's personal aversion to every thing that was good, he was stirred up by Jezebel his wife to destroy

every prophet in the land: and so bitter was he against Elijah in particular, that he sought him in all the adjacent countries, and even exacted an oath of their governors that they could not find him. But in the midst of all this wickedness, there was one even of Ahab's household, and he "the governor of his house," who retained his integrity, and used all his influence to protect the servants of the Lord. This man, constrained in vindication of his own character to bear testimony to himself, was enabled to declare to the Prophet Elijah, "I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth."

In considering the subject of early piety, we shall notice,

I. Wherein it should consist—

[We would not on any account disparage devotional feelings: but we must entertain some jealousy respecting them as a criterion of early piety. We know their immense value;—— but we know also how susceptible of strong impressions the youthful mind is, on whatever subject it is occupied—— and that the characteristic mark of a very numerous set of unprofitable hearers is, that "anon they receive the word with joy." We must therefore look for some better and safer test of piety than this.

Nor would we by any means undervalue a clear knowledge of the Gospel. A view of ourselves as sinful creatures, altogether helpless and hopeless in ourselves, and a view of Christ as the only and all-sufficient Saviour of the world, and an habitual consciousness that we must receive every thing out of his fulness, all this, I say, is absolutely essential to the Christian character—— but then it may all exist in the mind as a theory, without entering into the heart as a principle of life. Not only do the thorny-ground hearers evince this melancholy truth, but daily observation and experience compel us to acknowledge it——

There is however a test which is subject to no such uncertainties, namely, "the fear of God." By this we mean a reverential awe of the Divine Majesty, a dread of offending him, and a determination through grace to obey every one of his commandments—— This must be an abiding principle in the soul, operating as forcibly upon us in our most secret actions, as the presence of a fellow-creature would in reference to any thing which would expose us to universal execration.

Let it not however be supposed that we are now speaking

of a slavish fear, arising from an apprehension of God's judgments: we speak of a filial fear, which is excited as much by a sense of "his goodness," as by a dread of his displeasure. And it is remarkable, that, when the Prophet Hosea foretold the piety that should reign under the gospel dispensation, and in the millennial period, he characterized it in the very way that we have now done: "They shall seek the Lord, and David their king; and shall *fear the Lord and his goodness* in the latter days^a."

That we may be led to cultivate piety in early life, let us consider,

II. The great advantages of it—

"Godliness has the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come:" and the earlier it is acquired, the more will its inestimable value appear. Consider its use,

1. To the person who possesses it—

[When religion has acquired a just ascendant over a young person, it will *determine his connexions*; (he will not be unequally yoked with unbelievers as friends, and much less in that relation of life which death only can dissolve :) it will also *form his habits*, leading him to the study of the Holy Scriptures, to constant prayer, to holy watchfulness and self-denial, and to a conscientious regard for God in every thing that he does——— It will also *facilitate his attainments*: it is scarcely to be conceived what difficulties they have to struggle with through life, who have spent their early days in sensual indulgences: but those who have been early trained in the exercise of self-denial are enabled with comparative ease to restrain forbidden appetites, and to mortify unhallowed affections. Not that a life of holiness is easy to any one: it is a constant warfare, as long as we continue in the body: but the more we exercise ourselves in it, the more effectual will our efforts be, and the more certain our victory.]

2. To the world around us—

[Early piety attracts particular attention, and produces great effects, in encouraging the young, and in putting to shame the old. Only compare the benefits which the world receives from one who has the fear of God in his heart, with the evils it derives from one who lives, as it were, "without God:" how many are instructed, and comforted, and edified by the one, whilst multitudes have reason to curse the day that ever they beheld the other! It is truly said by Solomon, that "one

^a Hos. iii. 5.

sinner destroyeth much good." Yes, one sinner encourages and hardens many others in their iniquities, and places a stumbling-block in the way of all who desire to return to God: and, if he afterward have repentance given him from the Lord, he would in vain attempt to undo a thousandth part of the evil that he has done: many of his former associates in iniquity cannot be found; many are gone into the eternal world beyond a possibility of redemption; and if he were to warn all those to whom he could get access, the greater part of them would only laugh at him, and think him mad. All these distressing consequences of iniquity are avoided by him who devotes his early years to the service of his God: and perhaps, instead of having to reflect on the ruin that he has brought on others, he will find many in the day of judgment to whom his words and his example have been a source of good.

What may be done by a single person even under the most unfavourable circumstances, we see in Obadiah: no less than an hundred of the Lord's prophets did he conceal and nourish at his own expense, and at the risk of his own life; when, without his interposition, they would all have been put to death. And though we may never be in a capacity to render such a public service to the Church of God, we may be the means of keeping many from destruction, and of saving their souls alive.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who are fearing God in their youth—

[We rejoice that there are many Obadias amongst us, and perhaps some Timothys also, who even "from their childhood have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make them wise unto salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus." Happy people, and greatly to be envied, in thus consecrating to the Lord "the first-fruits" of your days! Regard not then the scoffs and ridicule of those who have no fear of God before their eyes. The day is coming when they will reproach themselves more than ever they reproached you, and applaud your choice far more than ever they condemned it^b.]

2. Those who have lost their youth without having yet obtained the fear of God—

[Ah! what have you lost! But blessed be God that you have not yet been given up to final condemnation. O listen to the voice of God, who says to you, "To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." Learn to improve the present hour, for you know not how soon your day of grace may terminate, and all possibility of salvation be cut off for ever.]

^b Wisd. v. 3—6.

CCCXLV.

DECISION OF CHARACTER.

1 Kings xviii. 21. *And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.*

IF a heathen should visit this country in order to ascertain what our religion was, and whether it was such as it became him to embrace, he would be altogether at a loss what judgment to form respecting it. From what he saw and heard in our churches, he would form a most favourable conclusion: he would say, Those people worship one God: they approach him through one Mediator, who died for them on a cross, and now lives to make intercession for them in heaven: they receive from God a divine almighty Agent, whom they call the Holy Spirit; through whose gracious operations they are enabled to turn from sin, and to walk in the ways of righteousness and true holiness. They are certainly a holy people; for from time to time they entreat of God that they may be enabled to live a righteous, sober, and godly life, to the glory of his holy name. But if he followed us home to our houses, he would begin to doubt whether we had any religion at all amongst us. He would find no worship of God in our families; perhaps none, or at best a mere formal worship, in our closets: he would hear nothing about religion in our daily conversation: he would see nothing in our conduct that would distinguish us from the better sort of heathens, and much that the more decent heathens would be ashamed of. He would therefore conclude, that we had no fixed opinion about religion at all; that we did not believe our own creed; and that we thought people would be as happy without any religion, as even Christianity itself could make them.

Such was the state of Israel of old, except that there was an outward idolatry established amongst them, whereas the idols which we worship have their

temples only in the heart. To bring the Jewish nation to a more consistent state, the Prophet Elijah expostulated with them in the passage before us; and, for their conviction, proposed to put it to the trial, whether Baal or Jehovah were the true God.

We do not intend to consider the text as connected with the history, because we reserve the history for a distinct discourse: we propose at present to illustrate and recommend *decision of character*.

Now decision of character ought to shew itself,

I. In our sentiments—

To form our opinions strongly upon doubtful points, or without sufficient evidence, is no part of that character which we wish to recommend: on the contrary, we would advise all to examine carefully every sentiment before they embrace it, and, when they have “proved all things, then to hold fast that only which is good.” But

The sentiments which we profess to hold, are not doubtful—

[As members of the Established Church, we hold that “there is one God, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all.” We hold also, that “all who worship this God, must worship him in spirit and in truth;” and that it is not a mere bodily service that he requires, but the service of the heart, and the entire devotion of the soul. Respecting these two points, *the proper object of our service, and the service which we are required to render him*, we apprehend there can be no doubt at all. Whether we consult the precepts of the Gospel, or look at the examples of the holy Apostles, the matter is equally clear; we can have no doubt but that it is both our duty and our privilege to serve God, yea to serve him with our whole hearts — — —]

On these things therefore our minds should be fixed and decided—

[If we consult the opinions of those around us, we shall be continually wavering in our judgment. But it is not from the vain conjectures of men that we are to form our sentiments: let men speak as they will respecting the propriety of serving Mammon, and of being satisfied with mere forms of godliness; let them agree to call every thing else by the odious

terms of fanaticism or hypocrisy; our judgment must not be in the least altered, unless they will undertake to convince us from the Holy Scriptures. The word of God is the only standard of true doctrine; and to it we must adhere, though the whole universe should oppose us. The number of Baal's prophets gave them no advantage with respect to truth; nor were Elijah's sentiments the more questionable, because he alone was found openly to maintain them: truth is the same, whether maintained by many or by few: and when we know what is truth, we should suffer no considerations whatever to invalidate its force, or to obstruct its influence.]

But decision of character must shew itself also,

II. In our conduct—

The only use of right sentiments is to regulate our conduct. When therefore we are convinced that there is a God who has a right to all the love of our hearts, and the service of our lives, we should then set ourselves to serve him,

1. With ardour—

[Lukewarmness is but ill suited to the service of our God. "We might as well be altogether cold, as neither cold nor hot." We should be "fervent in spirit, while we serve the Lord." Do we pray to God? we should "pour out our souls before him." Do we render thanks? we should call forth "all that is within us to bless his holy name." "Whatever our hand findeth to do, we should do it with our might." The people who contended in the games, whether they ran, or wrestled, or fought, should be just representations of us: yea, inasmuch as our contests are more important than theirs, our exertions should be proportionably greater.]

2. With fortitude—

[No man can engage heartily in the Lord's service without finding much to try his courage. To be a thorough Christian, especially in some circumstances, requires as much intrepidity as to face an armed host. Many thousands there are, who could brave death on a field of battle, who yet could not endure scorn and contempt from an ungodly world. But in whatever way we may suffer persecution for righteousness' sake, we should be ready to meet it: instead of being intimidated by the cross, we should rejoice and glory in it; and account death itself, in such a cause, to be rather an object of ambition than of dread. If only we be convinced that the Lord is God, we should serve him without the smallest concern about the consequences which such conduct may bring upon us.]

3. With perseverance—

[We are as much in danger of drawing back through weakness, as of being turned aside by fear. There are many who have suffered much for the cause of Christ, who yet become “weary in well-doing.” But we must never think that we have attained any thing, as long as any thing remains to be attained. We must “forget what is behind, and reach forward to that which is before.” We must engage in the service of our God, not for a season only, but for life: and as long as life lasts, our motto must be, “This one thing I do.” “If we put our hands to the plough, and look back, we are not fit for the kingdom of heaven.”]

TO RECOMMEND this decision of character to all who are journeying towards heaven, we observe, it is,

1. The easiest way—

[We know it is not easy to attain such a fixedness of mind and purpose: but, when we have attained it, our way is rendered far easier than when we are halting between two opinions or two courses^a. The man who has not a fixed principle is doubting and hesitating, every step he takes: but he who inquires simply, What is duty? and, What does my God require of me? has a plain path before him, and has nothing to do but to “walk in it.”]

2. The safest way—

[When a man is desirous of going to the utmost verge of what is lawful, and of conforming to the world as far as will consist with a hope of final salvation, he must often stand on very slippery ground; and it must be a miracle indeed if he do not one day fall. But he who, with a noble contempt of earthly things, is enabled to seek only what shall be most conducive to his spiritual welfare, stands at a distance from temptation, and, by “walking uprightly, walketh surely^b.”]

3. The happiest way—

[Any deviation from the path of duty must of necessity weaken the testimony which conscience might give respecting the rectitude of our minds: and it is certain that God will not vouchsafe the witness of his Spirit to those whose hearts are not right with him. These sources of happiness therefore must be closed to those who are not of a fixed decided character. Indeed such persons have very little comfort in any thing: their regard for God prevents their full enjoyment of the world; and their love of the world renders it impossible

^a Matt. vi. 22—24.

^b Jam. i. 8. 2 Pet. i. 10.

for them to find any real delight in God. Their prospects of future happiness too are by no means cheering to their souls: for they have reason to fear, that God will not accept the service of a divided heart. On the contrary, the man "who follows the Lord fully," enjoys now that peace of God which passeth all understanding, and looks forward with confidence to that day, when he shall receive the plaudits of his Divine Master^c.

In every view, therefore, decision of character is most desirable: and it is better to maintain a holy firmness with Elijah, though we be opposed by the whole world, than to halt between two opinions, or to be attempting to reconcile the inconsistent services of God and Mammon.]

^c 1 John iii. 20, 21.

CCCXLVI.

ELIJAH'S CHALLENGE TO THE PROPHETS OF BAAL.

1 Kings xviii. 24. *Call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken.*

UNBOUNDED is the dominion which God exercises over the minds of men: "the hearts of kings are in his hands, and he turneth them whithersoever he will." The heart of Ahab was exasperated against Elijah in the highest degree; insomuch that he sought him not only throughout his own kingdom, but through all the neighbouring kingdoms, in order that he might wreak his vengeance upon him. Yet, behold, now Elijah presents himself before him; and the hands of the infuriated monarch are tied; yea, the prophet sends him word that he is coming to meet him; and yet the king, who might have had a band of soldiers at his command, uses no means whatever to apprehend him. Moreover Elijah retorts upon him his injurious accusation, and tells him plainly, that *he* was "the troubler of Israel, by forsaking the Lord and following Baalim:" nay more, he enjoins the king to summon all the prophets of Baal to meet him at Mount Carmel; and the king obeys the mandate, as if he had been the subject,

and Elijah the sovereign. When they were convened, the prophet appears in the midst of them all, unprotected and alone; yet can neither the king, nor the people, put forth a hand to touch him; so awed were they and restrained by the invisible agency of Jehovah.

- I. The challenge which Elijah gave the worshippers of Baal on this occasion, is the first point to which we shall call your attention—

Neither Ahab nor his prophets would submit to the declarations of God's word: of course, any appeal to the Mosaic writings would have been in vain. But the claims of Baal and of Jehovah might be tried by an appeal to miracles: to them therefore, doubtless by divine direction, he makes his appeal; and proposes, that "the God who should answer by fire," should be acknowledged as the true and only God. Mark,

1. The test proposed—

[No proposal could have been more *wise* than this. By such a test as this, the matter might be decided without giving any undue advantage to the worshippers of Baal. On their side were the king, the court, the prophets; so that, if any thing could have been effected by means of a confederacy, no doubt they would have strained every nerve to gain their point: and he, being alone, would have been borne down, as it were, by the popular current: but here was no scope for fraud; no contrivances of theirs could counterfeit the sign proposed; nor could any doubt remain on the minds of the spectators when the sign itself should really appear.

Nor could any proposal be more *equitable*. The very idea of a God supposes, that he is one who can vindicate his own honour, and maintain his own authority; and that he will do so when a just occasion calls for it. When therefore the point at issue between Jehovah and Baal was to be settled for the satisfaction of the whole world, it was reasonable that there should be some display of omnipotence resorted to as the means of establishing their respective claims.

Of all tests that could have been devised, none could be more *decisive* than that proposed. Omnipotence alone could so control the elements, as to send down fire at the request of man. Satan indeed is called "the prince of the power of the air;" and on some occasions he has agitated the elements in a

tremendous way. But his power is limited; and he can exert it only when, and as far as, God sees fit to suffer him. Could he have produced the sign in favour of Baal, doubtless he would have been glad to do so: but God's own character was at stake; and no such permission could be given him.]

2. The issue of the trial—

[The worshippers of Baal prepared their sacrifice, and continued from morning to mid-day imploring from Baal the proposed evidence of his divinity. No answer coming to them, Elijah taunted them, and ridiculed their vain hopes — — But they did not yet despair; yea rather, they renewed their application to Baal with redoubled earnestness, leaping upon, or around, his altar, and cutting themselves with knives and lancets, to mix their own blood with that of their sacrifice. But all their efforts were in vain: no voice, no answer came; and Baal was proved an impotent and senseless idol.

At the time of the evening sacrifice, *the very hour when the sacrifice was offered at Jerusalem*, Elijah repaired an altar of the Lord, which had been broken down, and laid the bullock upon it in order, and, to shew that there was no collusion on his part, poured water in great abundance on the sacrifice, and on the wood, and filled with water also the trench that was round about the altar, and then made his supplication to his God, imploring from him the appointed sign, for the establishment of his own honour, and for the conversion of the people's souls. Instantly God answered in the appointed way; "a fire came down from heaven, and consumed not only the sacrifice and the wood, but the very stones of the altar; and licked up the water that was in the trench."

No doubt now remained. The people in the first instance had approved the proposed method of determining the point; and now "they fell upon their faces, and exclaimed, The Lord, He is the God! the Lord, He is the God!"

Thus we see the triumphant issue of the contest, and the indisputable right of Jehovah to the worship and service of the whole world.]

II. We now propose to give a similar challenge to all who worship the idols of their own hearts—

That all men are by nature idolaters is certain; for they all without exception "worship and serve the creature more than the Creator^a." The prophet speaks of men "setting up idols in their own hearts;" and what those idols are, we are at no loss to

^a Rom. i. 25.

declare; they are "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life"— — —

Now we have before established the principle, that the right of any Being to our worship ought to be judged of by his power to benefit those who devote themselves to him. Even the worshippers of Baal acknowledged the equity of this saying in reference to it, "It is well spoken." Let us then examine the claims of the world, and of Jehovah, by this test. Which of them ever has "*answered by fire*," or ever imparted spiritual blessings to his worshippers? Which can communicate the blessing

1. Of light?

[Behold the votaries of the world; What insight have they ever gained into any one spiritual truth? What do even the most learned amongst them know of the evil of sin, the beauty of holiness, the glory of Christ, or of a thousand other subjects connected with the spiritual life? Is it not found a truth, that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned^b?"— — —

On the other hand, is it not found, that the followers of Christ have the "eyes of their understanding enlightened;" and that "the things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, are revealed unto them by the Spirit^c?" Yes, it is as true at this day, as it was in the hour when our Lord himself declared it, that "God hath hid these things from the wise and prudent, and has revealed them unto babes; even so, because it seemeth good in his sight^d." He can have very little knowledge of the Christian world who is not acquainted with innumerable instances, wherein this assertion of our Lord is verified.]

2. Of strength?

[What lust have the votaries of the world been ever able to subdue? All, it is true, are not equally enslaved; but all are slaves to sin and Satan, though they do not all serve him in precisely the same way: as children of disobedience, they are under him as their god^e; nor do any "recover themselves out of his toils, till Jehovah gives them repentance to the acknowledgment of the truth^f"— — — Indeed the people of the world themselves confess this; for, when urged to walk according to the commandments of God, they do not hesitate to

^b 1 Cor. ii. 14.

^c 1 Cor. ii. 9, 10.

^d Matt. xi. 25, 26.

^e Eph. ii. 2.

^f 2 Tim. ii. 26.

vindicate their disobedience by saying, that the obedience required of them is impracticable.

But does not our blessed Lord and Saviour communicate strength to his followers, so that they are enabled to “overcome the world,” to “mortify the flesh,” and to “bruise even Satan himself under their feet?” Yes, there is armour provided for them, through the proper use of which they are made victorious over all their enemies; “nor does any sin retain its dominion over them” — — — They do indeed often cry, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of sin and death?” but they may always add, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”]

3. Of peace ?

[The voice of inspiration has plainly told us, that “there is no peace to the wicked.” Their consciences indeed are often stupified, and even “seared as with a hot iron,” so that they are altogether insensible of their state: and this insensibility is often mistaken for peace: but the votaries of this world are strangers to that delightful feeling which results from a sense of acceptance with God, and an assured hope of dwelling with him for ever — — —

But the follower of Christ has “a peace that passeth all understanding.” “Being justified by faith, he has peace with God,” together with a “joy unspeakable and glorified.” This peace he has even when all his guilt is most present to his mind, and when death and judgment appear close at hand; because “he knows in whom he has believed,” and is assured, that “there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” Hence he determinately obeys that injunction, “Thou shalt know no God but me: for there is no Saviour besides me^g.”]

Such are, in some little measure, the grounds on which we may decide between God and the world. We beg leave then to put to this whole assembly the following QUESTIONS;—

1. What is your judgment ?

[Which has the better title to your love and service,—the world, or God? If “God be a wilderness to Israel,” or, if the world can do more for you than He, then we are content that the world shall be your god, and that Jehovah shall hold an inferior place in your esteem: but if God is a fountain of living waters, and the whole creation be only as broken cisterns, then we call upon you to acknowledge “God as your God for ever and ever” — — —]

2. What should be your determination ?

[“Every man, as the prophet tells us, will walk in the name of *his* God,” whatever his idol may be, whether pleasure, or riches, or honour: “and we also should walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever^h.” In this resolution we should be fixedⁱ. What though all Israel be against us, and we stand alone? shall we withhold our testimony on that account? No: truth is truth, whether embraced by many or by few. The prophets of Baal were not at all the more right in their views, because they were so numerous; nor was Elijah the less right, because he had none to concur with him: nor did he account his singularity in what was good any reason for relinquishing it: on the contrary, though alone, he determined to adhere with all steadfastness to the Lord; and we in like manner should say with Joshua, “Though all Israel should depart from God, we and our houses will serve the Lord^k” — — —]

^h Mic. iv. 5.ⁱ Hos. xiv. 8.^k Josh. xxiv. 15.

CCCXLVII.

ELIJAH VISITED AND REPROVED BY GOD.

1 Kings xix. 11—14. *And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.*

THE history of all the saints of old sufficiently proves, that there is no such thing as sinless perfection to be found. There certainly have not been many more distinguished characters than Elijah; yet was he not exempt from sinful infirmities. Circumstances of peculiar difficulty are like a furnace that

tries the gold; and highly favoured indeed must he be, who, when in them, does not shew that he has yet a remainder of dross, from which he needeth to be purged. Doubtless the trials of Elijah were very heavy: he had asserted the honour of Jehovah in opposition to Baal; and had obtained such a triumph as might well lead to expect a most successful issue to his labours, in bringing back the people to the acknowledgment and worship of the true God. Methinks, this hope gave lightness to his spirits, and added wings to his feet, when he ran before Ahab to Jezreel. But behold, he had scarcely arrived at Jezreel, before Jezebel sent him word with bitter imprecations, that she would have him put to death within the space of one day. This so discouraged him, that he fled instantly to the land of Judah: and not thinking himself secure even there, he “left his servant behind him, and proceeded a day’s journey into the wilderness.” The condescension of God towards him on this occasion forms a striking contrast with his conduct. Let us notice,

I. The weakness of the prophet—

It is justly said of him, and most probably in reference to these very events, that “Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are^a.” In this part of his history we behold,

1. His unbelieving fear—

[On former occasions he had shewn great fortitude: he had just before dared to accuse Ahab to his face as “the troubler of Israel;” and to confront alone all the worshippers of Baal with four hundred and fifty of his prophets at their head: he had also put all those prophets to death, and then had accompanied Ahab to Jezreel: but now his faith failed him, and he doubted whether his God could protect him from the rage of Jezebel. Hence, instead of prosecuting the advantage which he had gained, and encouraging all the people to follow up their convictions, he fled from the scene of danger, and, by his cowardice, caused the whole people of Israel to return to the worship of Baal, whom for a moment they had disclaimed. Alas! what is man, if left to himself! the most

^a Jam. v. 17.

eminent saint, if unassisted by fresh communications of grace, sinks, and becomes, like Samson shorn of his locks, as weak as other men. In the instance before us we have a striking evidence, that man of himself can do nothing.]

2. His impatient desire—

[Wearied and disconsolate, he requested of God to “take away his life^b.” He had seen how little effect had been produced by former prophets; and from present appearances he thought that “he was no better than they,” nor likely to have any more success; and therefore he desired a speedy termination of his fruitless troubles. But how unbecoming was this! Whether successful or not in his endeavours, he was glorifying God by them, and should have accounted *that* an ample reward for all that he could do or suffer in his cause. Had he desired to depart in order that he might have a richer enjoyment of his God, the wish might have been good: but to desire death through mere disgust and weariness of life, was the sad fruit of criminal impatience^c.]

3. His hasty self-vindication—

[When the Lord interrogated him, “What doest thou here, Elijah?” he thought of nothing but his own services, and the sins of others: yea, when the question was repeated, he returned the same answer. How strange that he should not, on the repetition of the question especially, suspect himself, and acknowledge that he had come thither without any call or direction from his God! But so it too often is with the best of men: they are more ready to look with complacency on their virtues, than with contrition on their sins; and to censure with severity the faults of others, whilst they overlook their own. According to the prophet’s own account, he had done nothing amiss: but, if he had fairly stated the whole matter, his criminality would instantly have appeared. This shews, that there is not a man in the universe whose representation can be fully trusted in things which affect his own character: there is a partiality in all, which leads them to some degree of concealment in their own favour, and *that*, not only in the things which concern their conduct towards men, but even in the things which relate to God.]

Let us now contemplate,

II. The goodness of God towards him—

God, ever slow to anger, and rich in mercy, exer-

^b ver. 4.

^c See the two contrasted; 2 Cor. v. 4. “Not to be unclothed, but clothed upon.”

cised towards him the most astonishing kindness. Instead of noticing with severity what the prophet had done amiss,

1. He supplied his wants—

[The prophet had fled to the wilderness, where he could have no provision except by miracle; and he had little reason to expect, that, while he was fleeing from the path of duty, God would again interpose to feed him by ravens, or to point out another hostess that should sustain him by a miraculous supply of meal and oil. But God would not forsake his servant in his extremity: on the contrary, he now ministered to his wants by the instrumentality of an angel, giving him a miraculous supply of food, and afterwards sustaining him forty days and nights without any food at all. How marvellously gracious is God to his offending creatures! Indeed, if he did not display in this manner the riches of his grace, where is the creature that could hope for any thing at his hands? But this is the constant method of his procedure with sinful men: he finds us outcast and helpless, and he bids us live; and makes the depth of our misery an occasion of magnifying his own abundant mercy^d: yea, “where sin hath abounded, grace oftentimes much more abounds^e.”]

2. He reproved his errors—

[The question put to him was a kind reproof; it was, in fact, the same as saying, “Think whether thou hast not deserted the path of duty?” And when the question had not produced its desired effect, he displayed before him the terrors of his majesty in three successive manifestations of his power; and then, to soften and abase his yet unbroken spirit, he spake to him more effectually in a still small voice; thus renewing to him the wonders formerly exhibited on the same mountain unto Moses, both the terrific scenes of Sinai, and the milder display of his own glorious perfections. Truly it is amazing that the Almighty God should so condescend to the weakness of his creatures, and labour so to prepare their minds for the richer effusions of his grace and love.]

3. He rectified his apprehensions—

[Elijah supposed himself to be the only one in Israel that maintained a regard for God; but God informed him, that there were no less than seven thousand persons who had not yielded to the prevailing idolatry. What an encouraging consideration was this to the desponding prophet! Well might he return to his labours, when so many yet remained, either to co-operate

^d Ezek. xvi. 4—6.

^e Rom. v. 20.

with him in his exertions, or to be benefited by his instructions. Indeed it is a most consolatory thought to the Lord's people in every age, that there are many "hidden ones," who serve and honour God in secret, though their light has not so shone as to attract the attention of the world around them: and the answer which God made to the prophet on this occasion is adduced by St. Paul for this very end, namely, to shew us, that, in the very lowest state of the Church, there is, and ever shall be, "a remnant according to the election of grace^f."]

Among the various lessons which this history is suited to teach us, we may LEARN,

1. To be diffident of ourselves—

[Who that sees how the great Elijah failed, whilst at the same time he was unconscious of his failings, must not be ready to suspect himself? If God say, "One of you shall betray me," the reply of every one should be, "Lord, is it I?" Let us then inquire with ourselves, "What do I here?" Am I in *the place* that God would have me? and in *the spirit* that God would have me? Even the Apostles themselves on some occasions "knew not what spirit they were of." Let us remember, that the less we suspect ourselves, the more reason we have to fear that there is somewhat amiss in our conduct.]

2. To be confident in our God—

[We need look no further than to the history before us to see how exceeding abundant are the riches of God's grace and mercy. Surely the backsliders in heart, or act, may take encouragement to return to him — — — In reference to the Church also, we may be well assured, that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."]

^f Rom. xi. 2—5.

CCCXLVIII.

A REMNANT IN THE WORST OF TIMES.

1 Kings xix. 18. *Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.*

WE cannot always judge by outward appearances in religion. There is in some a forwardness, and display of piety; whilst in others there is a reserve and a delicate withdrawment from public notice. Amongst the former, a very great proportion turn

out like the stony or thorny-ground hearers; who, if they fall not altogether from their profession, never truly honour and adorn it. Where, on the contrary, there is little of outward zeal, we are ready to imagine that the word has produced little or no effect. In the days of the Prophet Elijah, there were none to bear him in countenance, by a bold and open testimony for God; so that he conceived that he stood alone in the midst of an apostate and idolatrous people. But there were many of the class referred to, even seven thousand, who had not been carried away by the general torrent of iniquity, but had maintained in secret a faithful adherence to their God. This, in answer to Elijah's complaint, was declared by God himself: and from that declaration I shall take occasion to shew,

- I. That in the worst of times, God has an elect people in the world—

In support of this very position, St. Paul quotes the words before us:—

[It appeared in the Apostle's days, that God had "cast off" his ancient people entirely. But St. Paul adduces himself as a proof to the contrary; and then, citing the answer given by Jehovah to his complaining servant Elijah, who thought that he was the only person in Israel that had remained faithful to his God, "Yet have I reserved to myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal^a," or "kissed it, in token of their religious veneration^b," he takes occasion to say, "Even so at this time, also, there is a remnant according to the election of grace^c."]

And on these words we may ground the same observation at this time—

[Through the tender mercy of God, we live in very different times from those of the Prophet Elijah. But the exercise of God's sovereign grace is still the same; and every person who faithfully adheres to God, amidst the wickedness that abounds in the world, is indebted altogether to the distinguishing grace of God, whose power alone has quickened and upheld him.

This is a truth which many are extremely averse to hear:

^a Rom. xi. 1—4.

^b Hos. xiii. 2.

^c Rom. xi. 5.

and, if it were really and of necessity connected with all the evils with which men load it, I should not wonder at the prejudices which are entertained against it. But indeed, when stated as it is revealed in Scripture, it is replete with godly comfort. For, who is there that would ever be saved, if he were left, like the fallen angels, without any succour from on high? Who would ever turn effectually to the Lord his God, if "God did not first give him both to will and to do of his good pleasure^d?" And I may further ask, Who is there, of whom we need despair? I will suppose him to be at this moment as bitter a persecutor as ever Saul was; yet may he, if God see fit, become a vessel of honour, like St. Paul, who was, even in the midst of all his violence, a chosen vessel, and had been so even from his mother's womb^e. If any man ever seemed beyond the reach of divine grace, it was Manasseh, who filled the temple of God itself with idols, and "made the streets of Jerusalem to run down with the blood of innocents:" yet even he, in consequence of God's electing love, was converted, and sanctified, and saved^f. So it may be, that some of our dear friends and relatives, who are at this moment immersed in wickedness of every kind, may yet have the eye of God fixed upon them for good, and, in despite of all their impiety, be "made willing people in the day of God's power^g." We read, that "whom God did foreknow, he did also predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son; and whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified^h:" and, for aught that we know, the same process may await some of whom we are ready to despair; and we may have the joy of seeing God's purpose, which was formed before the world began, effected in the conversion of our friends, and consummated in their glorification before the throne of God. In fact, the persons who are now most eminent in the divine life were once dead in trespasses and sins, even as others: and they all, without exception, will gladly acknowledge, in their own case, the truth of our Lord's declaration to his Apostles, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen youⁱ:" for all of them have within themselves an unquestionable evidence, that as soon would a cannon-ball return of its own accord to the orifice from whence it has been discharged, as they, if left to themselves, would ever have returned to God, from whom they had so deeply revolted.]

But to this cheering truth I must add,

^d Phil. ii. 13.

^e Gal. i. 13—15. with Acts ix. 1, 2, 14, 15.

^f 2 Chron. xxxiii. 3—13.

^g Ps. cx. 3.

^h Rom. viii. 29, 30.

ⁱ John xv. 16.

II. That the number of these elect far exceeds all that the most sanguine of God's saints would imagine—

In the days of Elijah they amounted to “seven thousand men in Israel”—

[True, these were but few, when compared with the whole nation of Israel: but they were many, when compared with one single individual.]

And who can tell but that they may, even in this kingdom, be many times as numerous as they appear to be?

[We are apt to estimate the number of the Lord's people by the numbers who make an open profession of religion: but there may be, and I doubt not are, multitudes throughout the land, who serve their God in sincerity, whilst, from a variety of circumstances, they have not been led to such displays of piety, as should attract the attention of the public. They conform not to the corrupt habits of the world around them, but “bow their knee to Jesus,” their Divine Saviour^k; and “kiss the Son,” as the exclusive object of their homage^l. They may possibly be secluded in the bosom of a family who are unfriendly to religion: or they may not be within the reach of an energetic ministry or pious associates: or they may be in a station of life where occupation and confinement preclude them from any great intercourse with their neighbours. But, whatever be the occasion of their privacy, I doubt not but the fact is as I have stated; and that God has, “in this and other lands, many hidden ones,” who, like plants in a wilderness, blossom unseen, and diffuse their fragrance unperceived, except by God himself.]

But to all of you I would say,

1. Let your religion be such that God himself may bear witness to it—

[God saw Nathanael under the fig-tree, and bare witness to him, as “an Israelite indeed, in whom there was no guile.” Let “your hearts also be right with God,” my beloved Brethren. Let him see that you resolutely withstand “the corruptions that are in the world;” and that you “walk with him,” even as Enoch did, in sweet communion, and in unreserved obedience — — —]

2. Let your religion be such, that God may be glorified by it—

^k Rom. xiv. 10, 11.

^l Ps. ii. 12.

[Certainly it is the duty of every man to confess Christ before men, and to glorify him by an open profession of his faith. Where an opportunity is afforded, this is absolutely indispensable: and, if we be deterred from it by any consideration under heaven, we must pay the penalty, even the loss of our immortal souls. "With the heart, indeed, man believeth unto righteousness: but it is with the mouth that confession is to be made unto salvation^m." Be not, then, ashamed of Christ; but "take up your cross daily, and follow him:" and "so make your light to shine before men, that all who behold it may glorify your Father who is in heaven."]

^m Rom. x. 10.

CCCXLIX.

CALL OF ELISHA TO THE PROPHETIC OFFICE.

1 Kings xix. 21. *Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.*

IT is an unspeakable consolation to an aged minister to see others springing up around him, who shall carry on the same blessed work in which he has spent his life, and promote among the rising generation the Redeemer's interests, when he shall be removed to a better world. This happiness it pleased God to confer upon his servant Elijah. Elijah had thought himself alone in the kingdom of Israel; but God informed him, that there were no less than seven thousand others who had in heart adhered to him, though they had not openly testified against the worship of Baal. He moreover directed him to anoint Elisha to be a prophet in his room; and assured him, that the nation of Israel should continue to be benefited by the ministrations of his successor, when he should be removed from the world.

According to the direction given him, Elijah sought Elisha; and, finding him engaged in agricultural labours, called him from them to an employment altogether new and heavenly.

In this appointment of Elisha to the prophetic office there are two things to be noticed;—

I. His peculiar call—

Elijah, in passing by, cast his mantle upon Elisha. In this action there was nothing that could at all convey the intent for which it was done; nor did Elijah utter a word in explanation of it: on the contrary, when he saw Elisha instantly running after him, he said, "Go back again; for what have I done unto thee?" But there was a secret power accompanying this act, which wrought effectually on the mind of Elisha, and constrained him to devote himself wholly to the Lord.

Now this will serve to shew the true nature of conversion in general.

God makes use of different means for the conversion of mankind—

[Many he awakens by some remarkable dispensation of his providence^a — — — Many he enlightens by the preaching of his word — — — and many, without any external means, he leads to the knowledge of himself by the teaching of his Holy Spirit — — —]

But whatever be the means, the work is his alone—

[There is not any more power in the creature, no, not even in miracles, to effect the conversion of men, than there was in the mantle cast upon Elisha. There were thousands who saw and heard all that took place at our Saviour's death, as well as the centurion, and yet remained unaffected with it. Multitudes also heard the preaching of our Lord and his Apostles without experiencing from it any saving influence. The external call, by whomsoever given, has been resisted by myriads in every age^b. That which alone has made the difference between one man and another, has been the influence of the Holy Spirit accompanying the word: "Neither Paul nor Apollos could effect any thing; it has been God alone that gave the increase^c:" He has "revealed his arm^d," and made men "willing in the day of his power^e:" He has "breathed upon the dry bones, and bid them live^f."]

A divine energy was felt by Elisha; as appears clearly from,

II. His prompt obedience—

^a Matt. xxvii. 54.

^c 1 Cor. iii. 5—7.

^e Ps. cx. 3.

^b Rom. x. 21. Matt. xxiii. 37.

^d Isai. liii. 1.

^f Ezek. xxxvii. 1—10.

Instantly he ran after Elijah in token of his desire to become his stated attendant—

What appears to have expressed reluctance, proceeded in reality from no such feeling—

[Elisha desired to go home first and salute his parents, and then to wait upon Elijah. Had this arisen from a desire to defer his obedience to the heavenly call, it would have been wrong; because the call of God supersedes every other consideration under heaven^g. But it arose from a love to his parents, and a desire to approve himself to them as a dutiful son. He was sensible that they must wonder at the sudden change that had taken place in his views and conduct; and he was desirous to shew them at least that his zeal for God had not diminished his regard for them. In this view there can scarcely be a more useful example found in all the sacred records. Young people, when first made to feel the importance of a heavenly life, are apt to forget, that they ought by every possible means to win their parents. They should cultivate to the uttermost a meek, humble, conciliatory spirit; and shew, that, if they be constrained to act in opposition to the wishes of their superiors, they are not actuated by conceit or self-will, but by a sense of paramount obligation to God. They should be as careful as possible to evince the excellency of their principles by the modesty of their demeanour, and by their increased endeavours to fulfil every relative and social duty. This would render religion amiable in the eyes of many, who, in the conduct of their children or dependents, find nothing but stumbling-blocks and occasions of disgust.

The making a feast also of two of his oxen may appear strange: but we apprehend that it was done in much the same spirit as that which he manifested towards his parents. His destroying a yoke of oxen with their instruments might be intended, in part, to shew, that he henceforth renounced all secular employments; and, in part, to express love to all for whom he made the feast. In this view it strongly confirms all the foregoing observations respecting his parents; and teaches us to cultivate every benevolent disposition towards the people of the world, whilst we separate from their company, and condemn their practice. If from a sense of duty we “come out from them and are separate,” and shun all unnecessary conformity to their ways, we should give them no room to think that we either hate or despise them; but should convince them, that, like Noah, we would press them all into the ark, if they would but listen to our voice, and comply with our advice.]

He instantly became an attendant on Elijah, and “ministered unto him”—

[Though from his ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen it appears that he was a man of some consideration, yet he did not think it any indignity to wait upon Elijah as a menial servant^h. His reasons for this were various. He did it doubtless from a sense of love to God. Knowing that Elijah was greatly beloved of the Lord, and feeling that he himself had received through his instrumentality the richest blessings to his soul, he delighted to express his love to God by his zeal in the service of this distinguished prophet.

Moreover Elisha hoped now to be himself useful in advancing the cause of God in the land. It was true, that, as a novice, he could add but little to Elijah: but he hoped to learn from that honoured servant of the Lord, and to receive from his instructions and example, lessons, which might be of the utmost service to himself in the future execution of his own office: and for the attainment of such benefits he judged that no sacrifice could be too great, no service could be too laborious.

This shewed that there was on Elisha's mind not a mere transient impression caused by the novelty of this extraordinary call, but a real radical change of heart, agreeably to that which has been manifested by all true convertsⁱ, and that which St. Paul represents as having taken place in the Macedonian Church; “They gave themselves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God^k.”]

We shall CONCLUDE with a few words,

1. Of inquiry—

[We ask not whether any of you have ever been called either *suddenly* or in *any extraordinary manner* to serve God? but we ask whether your mind and heart have ever been so changed, that, from following nothing but this world, you have been brought to serve and follow the Lord Jesus Christ? This is a change which all must experience. This is conversion, in whatever way it is effected: and nothing but this constitutes conversion. Put away then all fanciful and enthusiastic notions about the *time* or the *manner* of conversion, and examine carefully into its *effects* as daily visible in your life and conversation — — —]

2. Of advice—

[If any of you are convinced that it is your duty to give

^h 2 Kings iii. 11.

ⁱ Exod. iii. 1. Matt. iv. 18—29. and ix. 9. and xix. 27.

^k 2 Cor. viii. 5.

up yourselves to God, guard against every thing that may cause you to waver in your purposes. Your dearest friends and relatives will be ready to say, "Spare yourself:" but you must not yield to any such entreaties. They will tell you, "That you will injure your worldly prospects:" but so did Elisha—"That there are few who approve and countenance such conduct:" but so Elisha found it, there being not one, except his master Elijah, that openly espoused the cause of God—"That you will subject yourself to persecution:" but it was in a season of bitterest persecution that Elisha joined himself to Elijah. As to *the manner* of conducting yourselves towards your parents or superiors, we again say, Behave with meekness, with modesty, with love: "*Kiss* your father and your mother:" but do not prefer them before your God¹. There are two extremes against which you must guard, namely, a rough, petulant, self-willed determination to follow your own way, without any regard to the feelings or sentiments of your superiors, on the one hand; and an easy complying temper that sacrifices duty to interest, on the other hand. The union of meekness with fidelity, and of love with firmness, is that at which you must aim; combining "the wisdom of the serpent with the harmlessness of the dove."]

¹ Matt. x. 37.

CCCL.

AGAINST SELF-CONFIDENCE.

1 Kings xx. 11. *Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.*

HOWEVER blinded men are in reference to their own sins, they can easily discern sin in others, and declare sagaciously enough what true wisdom requires. We should certainly not have expected Ahab, of all men, to become a monitor: the dictates of wisdom seem but ill suited to his lips. But the counsel, which he here gave to the king of Syria, was excellent, and is deserving of all the attention that can be paid to it.

In considering this counsel, it is my intention to point out,

I. The wisdom of it—

It may be noticed either,

1. As a political maxim—

[The history of all mankind attests the propriety of this advice. In every age there will be found unnumbered instances to prove that “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor yet bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skill^a.” The event of Benhadad’s boasting, as recorded in the chapter before us, is a remarkable illustration of this truth. So numerous were his forces, that he declared the very dust of Samaria would not suffice for each man to take an handful: yet were they all put to flight by a very small force (the whole of Ahab’s army scarcely exceeding seven thousand men); and not by experienced warriors, but “by the young men of the princes of the provinces,” and those amounting to no more than two hundred and seventy-two^b. Whether in public or in private life, undue confidence will be sure to entail on us the most bitter disappointments — — —]

2. As a religious theorem—

[For man to boast of any thing that he will do, argues an utter forgetfulness of what human nature is, (imbecility itself — — —^c): of what God is, (the sole Governor of the universe, who “worketh all things after the counsel of his own will^d” — — —): and of what he himself is; (for who has not, from bitter experience, learned, that “he who trusteth in his own heart is a fool^e?”) Indeed, an overweening conceit of our own powers is the most ready way to arm God himself against us, and to ensure the defeat of our own purposes^f — — — With God on his side, a stripling, with his sling and stone, may overcome a vaunting Goliath^g: but, without God’s assistance, the strongest man on earth can effect nothing^h.]

That we may see the practical utility of this advice, I will proceed to mark,

II. The importance of it—

It is of special importance,

1. To those who are just entering on their spiritual course—

[Persons in this situation are often ready to imagine, that their warfare is almost accomplished, when it is, in fact, scarcely yet begun. But, if God, as in the case of Israel coming out of Egyptⁱ, keep off those trials which you are not yet prepared

^a Eccl. ix. 11.

^b ver. 13—21.

^c 2 Cor. iii. 5.

^d Dan. iv. 35. Eph. i. 11.

^e Prov. xxviii. 26.

^f Isai. x. 13—19.

^g 1 Sam. xvii. 44—47.

^h John xv. 5. Jer. x. 23.

ⁱ Exod. xiii. 17.

to encounter, do not think that you have no warfare to maintain. The way to heaven will not prove so easy as you imagine. If you become "a soldier of Jesus Christ," you must prepare for war, and be ready to "fight the good fight of faith." Sooner or later, you shall have occasion for all the armour that he has provided for you^k.]

2. To those who are going on victorious—

[Satan's devices are more than can be numbered. He may, and no doubt often does, recede for a time, that he may renew his assaults to greater advantage. See the stratagem of Joshua against the men of Ai — — —, and you will have a just picture of the wiles by which Satan, that subtle serpent, is labouring to destroy you^l. Your only safety is in watchfulness and prayer^m — — —]

3. To those who are most advanced in the divine life—

[To you, no less than to others, is this counsel of great value. Did Lot, after withstanding the temptations of Sodom, fall in the cave? Did David, after all his high attainments, fall; and Solomon, "after the Lord had appeared to him twice?" Did Peter violate all his resolutions; and Demas, after his long course of steadfastness, relinquish at last all his professions? Who, then, are you, that you shall be secure? "Let him that thinketh he standeth, whoever he be, take heed lest he fallⁿ:" let him "not be high-minded, but fear^o:" "blessed is the man that feareth always^p." If Paul needed to keep his body under, "lest, after preaching to others, he himself should become a castaway^q," there is no creature under heaven to whom the counsel in my text is not altogether suitable and necessary. To all, then, I say, "Look to yourselves, that ye lose not the things that ye have wrought, but that ye receive a full reward^r."]

^k Eph. vi. 10—18.

^l 2 Cor. xi. 3. 1 Pet. v. 8.

^m Mark xiv. 38.

ⁿ 1 Cor. x. 12.

^o Rom. xi. 20.

^p Prov. xxviii. 14.

^q 1 Cor. ix. 27.

^r 2 John ver. 8.

CCCLI.

AHAB'S SIN IN SPARING BENHADAD.

1 Kings xx. 42. *And he said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Because thou hast let go out of thy hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people.*

IN every page of the Holy Scriptures we are reminded, that the Lord disposeth of all events according to his sovereign will, whilst at the same time he suits his dispensations to the conduct of mankind. Between the parties spoken of in our text there was little difference with respect to their desert before God: Ahab was an idolatrous Israelite; and Benhadad was a proud atheistical heathen. God appointed them, as his instruments, to punish each other: his primary purpose indeed was to destroy the heathen prince, and to rescue from his tyranny the king of Israel. For this end, God left Benhadad to follow the dictates of his own proud spirit, and gave to Ahab the directions and encouragements that were necessary to ensure success. But Ahab neglected to execute the commands of God; and then God reversed his sentence, and denounced against Ahab and his people, the destruction that had been designed for Benhadad and his people. This is told us in the words which we have read; and which will serve to shew us,

I. The power which God will exercise towards us—

Great has been the temporal deliverance^a recently vouchsafed unto us—

[What has been done for our northern allies, has in reality been done for us. And, behold what a wonderful deliverance that is which the official reports announce to us! The resemblance between it and the facts recorded in the chapter before us is so striking, that, notwithstanding we do not in general approve of minute statements of this kind in a public discourse, we cannot forbear to point it out to you.

Behold then the origin of the contest between Benhadad and the king of Israel; the war was altogether unprovoked on the part of Ahab, and proceeded from the insufferable pride and tyranny of the Syrian monarch. Behold his boastings, whilst yet he was “only girding on his armour:” yet, notwithstanding his confederate armies were so numerous, he was vanquished by a little band of princes, whose efforts he utterly despised: and this proud boaster fled away on horseback from the field of

^a Preached a few days after Buonaparte's return to Paris, from his invasion of Russia (1812), after the destruction of his army, and just previous to its utter annihilation.

battle, whilst his army was defeated with great slaughter. Mortified beyond measure, but not humbled, he determines to collect another army, numerous as the first, and to effect the destruction of his victorious enemy. At the return of the year he renews his attempts; but, notwithstanding the immense disproportion of the contending armies, he is again defeated with the loss of a hundred thousand men; and God completes his destruction by causing the walls of Aphek to fall, and bury in their ruins twenty-seven thousand more of those who had escaped the edge of the sword. Thus was this tyrannical oppressor constrained at last to hide himself in an inner chamber, and to become a suppliant for his own life.

Behold the parallel. The proudest and most tyrannical oppressor that has appeared in modern ages, invaded Russia for no other reason than because she would not be subservient to his will, and aid his ambitious designs. He went at the head of an immense army of confederate princes; boasting that no power could withstand him: but through the merciful intervention of Providence he has been vanquished, and that too by men whom he had despised as incapable of standing before a single regiment of his warriors; and he himself *fled on horseback from the field of battle, and hastened back in disguise to his own country, leaving his whole army to be a prey to the sword of the avenger, and to the elements*, which have left scarcely any remaining to record the history of their disasters. This man however is now boasting, like Benhadad, that he will with the returning spring replace his armies, and renew his assaults. He pours the same contempt on God that the Syrian monarch did. Benhadad indeed did acknowledge his defeat to have proceeded from a superior Being, though he limited his power to the hills, and thought to overcome him in the plains: but this atheistical ruler discards God entirely, and talks of nothing but "fate and fortune." What shall be the issue of his future attempts, God alone knows: but we think it highly probable, that he is working out his own destruction as Benhadad did.

We cannot fail of acknowledging the interposition of Heaven in the history of Benhadad: let us be willing also most thankfully to acknowledge it in the events which we have just recited.]

Great also is the spiritual deliverance which God will vouchsafe to all who look unto him—

[The power of our spiritual enemies is infinitely more disproportionate to ours, than that of Benhadad to the king of Israel^b— — — But God has instructed us how to overcome

^b Eph. vi. 12.

them, and will enable us to do it^c———No enemy shall prevail against us, if only we rely on him, and follow his directions^d———His people in every age have been made victorious^e———and we also, if we fight manfully under the banners of the cross, shall have “Satan himself shortly bruised under our feet”———]

In this connexion it is highly requisite to contemplate,

II. The fidelity we should exercise for him—

God punished Ahab for not executing faithfully the work assigned him—

[As Agag, king of Amalek, had formerly been delivered into the hands of Saul in order to his destruction, so was now Benhadad into the hands of Ahab. But Ahab, elated with vanity, spared the captive monarch, and restored him to his throne; and thus brought upon himself and upon his own people the destruction which was primarily intended for their Syrian enemies.

The way in which this sentence was denounced against him was very remarkable. A prophet was required to personate a wounded soldier, and by a well-contrived parable to get Ahab to condemn himself. The artifice succeeded; and Ahab did unwittingly condemn himself, and thereby justify God in executing upon him the sentence which he had passed upon the supposed offender. And it was but about three years afterwards that Ahab himself was slain in battle with the Syrian monarch, whom he had so inconsiderately spared.]

And shall not *we* be called to account for the manner in which we execute his commands in relation to our spiritual enemies?

[As to what may be God's will in reference to our great *temporal* foe, we presume not to judge: and where an express revelation is wanting, we must be guided by justice and political expediency. But respecting our *spiritual* enemies we have no doubt. He requires them all to be slain without exception: not one is to be spared. The great master-sin, whatever it be, “the sin that most easily besets us,” must be the object of our more determined hostility^f. If one sin be spared, *our life must go for the life of that*: if it be dear as “a right eye,” or necessary as “a right hand,” we have no alternative, but to destroy it utterly, or to perish eternally

^c Eph. vi. 13—18.

^d Isai. liv. 17. Rom. viii. 31—39.

^e Heb. xi. 32—34.

^f Heb. xii. 1.

“in hell fire^g” — — — Shall we then rest content with any victory, whilst so much as one lust remains to be mortified and subdued? — — —]

ADDRESS,

1. The proud and presumptuous—

[Let not any imagine it an easy thing to get to heaven: our foes are exceeding numerous and powerful; and the more secure we are in our own conceit, the more certain we are to be subdued before them — — — “Let us not be high-minded, but fear.”]

2. The timid and desponding—

[Our weakness, though a reason for crying mightily to God for aid, is no reason for despondency. “When we are weak, then are we strong,” because God will then interpose to “perfect his own strength in our weakness.” If, as we are told, “a worm shall thresh the mountains^h,” then need not any man fear, if only he go forth in Jehovah’s strength, and follow the directions which God has given him. The language of the feeblest saint should be, “Who art thou, thou great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plainⁱ.”]

3. The humble and victorious—

[Some there are who, though crying occasionally, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?” are yet able to add with joy, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Yes, many there are who can say, “Thanks be to God, who always causeth us to triumph in Christ!” Let them therefore be more and more joyful and confident in their God. But let none ever forget, that their enemies, however often repulsed, are watching for opportunities to renew their assaults. Whilst we are in this world we must not for a moment lay aside our armour, or intermit our exertions. Soon the period of final victory shall arrive; and then shall we be invested with that glorious kingdom which God has promised to all that overcome^k.]

^g See how frequently this awful truth is repeated, and *this terrific language used*, in Mark ix. 43—48.

^h Isai. xli. 14, 15.

ⁱ Zech. iv. 7.

^k Rev. iii. 21.

CCCLII.

AHAB AND ELIJAH IN NABOTH'S VINEYARD.

1 Kings xxi. 20. *And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee.*

THE office of a minister is doubtless the most honourable that can be sustained by man; but it is at the same time the most arduous. If indeed the people to whom we carry the glad tidings of salvation were willing to put away their sins and embrace the proffered mercy, there would be comparatively little difficulty in discharging our duty: but men are averse to receive our message: they “love darkness rather than light;” yea, “they hate the light,” and would even extinguish it, rather than be constrained to see the evil of their ways. Hence those ministers who are faithful, are universally accounted “the troublers of Israel,” and the “enemies” of those whom they labour to convert: and they must go with their lives in their hands, if they will approve themselves to God and to their own conscience. The justice of this observation is manifest from the address of Ahab to the Prophet Elijah: in which we see,

I. How greedily men commit sin—

Horrible beyond measure was the conduct of Ahab which is here recorded—

[We blame not his wish to be accommodated with Naboth's vineyard, nor the equitable offers which he made to obtain it: but we blame the inordinate desire which he entertained for so worthless an object, and the vexation which the disappointment of it occasioned. What a striking proof have we here of the misery which unsubdued lusts create! A king possessed of large dominions, augmented lately by the acquisition of immense power, is dejected, and sick at heart, because he cannot obtain a little plot of ground adjoining to his palace, of ground which the owner could not alienate consistently with the commands of God.

Jezebel his wife, indignant that a potent monarch, like him, should be thwarted in his desires, undertakes that they shall not long be ungratified. She takes his seal, and gives orders in his name, that the elders of Israel shall proclaim a fast, as if some great iniquity which menaced the safety of the state had been committed; that then they shall arrest Naboth as the guilty person, and suborn false witnesses, who shall accuse him of blaspheming God and the king; and that they shall instantly proceed to stone him to death. Shocking as this injustice was, methinks its enormity was small in comparison of that impious mockery of religion with which it was cloked.

But what must have been the state of that nation where such an order could be given so confidently, and be carried into execution with such facility! Truly we can never be sufficiently thankful for the equity with which our laws are administered in Britain, and the security which we enjoy, both of our lives and property, under their protection.

The tidings of Naboth's death being announced by Jezebel, Ahab instantly proceeded to take possession of his vineyard; manifesting thereby his perfect approbation of all that Jezebel had done. Conscious of his cordial participation in her crimes, he could make no reply to the prophet's accusation, "*Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?*" He could only say, "*Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?*" In truth, his own conscience testified against him, that "he had sold himself to work evil in the sight of the Lord."]

Horrible as this was, and far surpassing any thing which is commonly found amongst us, it yet is in many respects imitated by the great mass of mankind—

[It is surely no uncommon thing for men at this day to covet what belongs not to them, and so inordinately to desire it as to use unlawful and dishonest means of obtaining it. Nor is it uncommon for men to feel a disappointment so acutely, as to lose the enjoyment of every thing they possess through vexation about something unpossessed. And so are the consciences of some men formed, that they will connive at wickedness which of themselves they would not perpetrate, and avail themselves of the advantages which the iniquity of others has procured for them. Let valuable articles be offered for sale as having been clandestinely imported without a payment of the accustomed due; how few will turn away from them on account of the unlawful way in which they have been procured! How few will say, "Perhaps a conflict has been maintained for these, and the blood of some revenue-officer has been shed to preserve them:" at all events such risks are incurred by this traffic, and the lives of multitudes are daily endangered by it; and shall I satisfy my appetite with that for which so many "have jeopardized their lives^a?" No: the generality of persons, who yet pretend to be honest and humane, will be as pleased with the possession of what has been thus iniquitously gained, as ever Ahab was with the acquisition of Naboth's vineyard.

Again, there are those who for lucre sake will aid in betraying or corrupting an innocent unsuspecting female: and how

^a 2 Sam. xxiii. 15—17.

many are there who would readily enough avail themselves of an advantage so obtained; or at least conspire to rivet the chains once forged, and to derive pleasure to themselves from the misery of their fellow-creatures!

Alas! the world is full of characters, whose "hearts are exercised with covetous practices^b," and who "work all uncleanness with greediness^c," or, as the prophet expresses it, "do evil with both hands earnestly^d."]

If we presume to remonstrate with such persons, we shall soon see,

II. How indignantly they take reproof—

Great was the indignation which Ahab expressed against Elijah—

[Possibly there might be some surprise expressed in that question, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" Certain it is that Ahab little expected to find Elijah there; nor would he have gone down to the vineyard of Naboth, if he had at all conceived that he should have met there such an unwelcome monitor. But there was also much wrath contained in this address: "What business hast thou here? What dost thou mean by presuming to interfere with me? Art thou privy to what has been done? and art thou come to gratify thy spleen as in past times by denouncing judgments against me?" Never was a human being so odious in Ahab's eyes, as Elijah was at this moment.]

This however only shews what is in the heart of all against the faithful servants of the Lord—

[Ministers are sent by God as monitors, to "shew the house of Jacob their sins^e:" but who welcomes them in that character? Let them go to any company, or even to an individual, that is violating the laws of God, and let them testify against the evil that is committed; will their admonitions be received with thankfulness? Will not their interposition be deemed rather an impertinent intrusion? Yes; such is the light in which it will be viewed, *however gross and unjustifiable the sin is that has been committed*. When Amaziah had conquered the Edomites, he took their gods to be his gods in preference to Jehovah: and when Jehovah sent him a prophet to remonstrate with him on the folly and impiety of his conduct, instead of yielding to the reproof, he threatened the

^b 2 Pet. ii. 14.

^c Eph. iv. 19.

^d Mic. vii. 2, 3. This paints with great exactness the conduct of multitudes who tread in the steps of Ahab: and the last clause expresses their complacency in their sins.

^e Isai. lviii. 1.

prophet with death, if he did not instantly "forbear^f." In the same light it is viewed, *however gentle and kind the expostulation may be*. When the inhabitants of Sodom required of Lot to deliver up to them the men whom he had received under his roof, nothing could exceed the tenderness of his reproof; "I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly." Nay, he even adopted the unjustifiable expedient of offering them his two daughters in their stead: yet, notwithstanding this astonishing condescension, they were full of wrath against him, and threatened to "deal worse with him than with them^g." We must further say, that it was viewed in this light, *when God himself became the monitor*. When Cain had murdered his brother Abel, God came to him and asked, "Where is Abel thy brother?" to which this impious reply was made, "I know not: Am I my brother's keeper^h?" The truth is, that men think themselves at liberty to do what they please against God; but no one is to presume to espouse the cause of God against themⁱ. The plain language of their hearts is, "Our lips are our own: Who is Lord over us^k?"

It would be well too if this presumptuous spirit were confined to those who are the open enemies of God: but it is not unfrequently found even amongst the professed followers of Christ; for it was to such that the Apostle addressed himself, when he said, "Am I become your enemy because I tell you the truth^l?" Let religious professors be on their guard against this great evil; for, in proportion as it prevails, it gives reason to fear that they are deceiving their own souls, and that their religion is vain.]

But how boldly soever they reply against God, we may see in the answer of Elijah,

III. How certainly they ruin their own souls—

The fearless prophet soon taught the murderous monarch what he was to expect—

["I have found thee;" and God has found thee, and his judgments ere long will find thee too. Agreeably to the prediction of Elijah, though the judgments were deferred in consequence of Ahab's forced humiliation, the blood of Ahab, like Naboth's, was licked by dogs, and the body of Jezebel was devoured by them in the very place where Naboth had been destroyed by her command. And, not long after, the elders of that very city Jezreel, who at the command of Ahab had slain Naboth, slew all the seventy sons of Ahab in one

^f 2 Chron. xxv. 16.

ⁱ Amos v. 10.

^g Gen. xix. 5—9.

^k Ps. xii. 4.

^h Gen. iv. 9.

^l Gal. iv. 16.

single night at the command of Jehu^m: so exactly were the threatened judgments of Elijah executed upon him and upon his whole family.]

In like manner shall the judgments of God overtake all who continue obstinate in their sins—

[“He that being often reproved, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, saith the Lord, and that without remedy.” Men hope that “they shall escape for their wickedness:” but God beholds it, and will call them to account for it in due season. It is in vain to think that any thing shall be hid from him: for “there is no darkness nor shadow of death, where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves.” Adam, after the commission of his sin, hoped to hide himself from God; but God sought him out; “Adam, where art thou?” Achan thought he had altogether escaped notice; but God appointed the lot to fall upon him, when, according to human calculations, the chance was two millions to one in favour of his escape. On many occasions too the punishment has instantly followed the detection, as in Gehazi’s leprosy, and the sudden death of Ananias. But where the sins of men remain concealed or unpunished in this world, they shall not escape notice in the world to come; for “God will bring every secret thing into judgment;” and fulfil in its utmost extent that awful declaration of the Psalmist, “making them like a fiery oven in his anger, and swallowing them up in his wrath^o.”]

This subject speaks powerfully to DIFFERENT CHARACTERS;

1. To wilful and impenitent transgressors—

[What Moses said to all Israel, we must say to you, “Be sure your sin will find you out.” You may glory in your success, and “roll your iniquity under your tongue as a sweet morsel, as Ahab did, but your sin shall ere long meet you to your sorrow and confusion; yea, every sin that you have ever committed shall meet you at the bar of judgment; and, when addressed by you as Elijah was, shall return you the same answer as he did to Ahab; “Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? I have found thee.” The long-suffering of God may bear with you for a season; but “your judgment lingereth not, and your damnation slumbereth not^p.”]

2. To those who have repented of their sin—

[Your sins, purged away by the precious blood of Christ, shall be sought for, but not be found^q: God has “blotted them

^m 2 Kings ix. 26. ⁿ Job xxxiv. 21, 22.

^o Ps. xxi. 8, 9.

^p 2 Pet. ii. 3. and iii. 9.

^q Jer. l. 20.

out as a morning cloud," and "cast them all behind him into the very depths of the sea^r." It is an express engagement of his covenant, that "your sins and iniquities he will remember no more^s." Think, my Brethren, what an unspeakable mercy this is, and let it be your daily and hourly employment to abase yourselves before God, and to wash in the fountain of your Redeemer's blood.]

3. To those who are God's messengers to a guilty world—

[It is at the peril of the watchman's soul, if through sloth or cowardice he neglect to warn men of their approaching danger. Brethren, we must, like Elijah, put ourselves in the way of sinners, and bear testimony for God against them. This is a painful, but necessary duty. You admire the discharge of it in Elijah; do not then disapprove of it in us. But we must "speak, whether ye will hear, or whether ye will forbear." God's command is plain, "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully^t." O that every servant of the Lord might resemble this man of God! and that instead of having to appear as witnesses against you at the bar of judgment, we might now find you obedient to the word, and have you in that day as "our joy and crown of rejoicing" for evermore!]

^r Mic. vii. 18, 19.

^s Heb. x. 17.

^t Jer. xxiii. 28, 29.

CCCLIII.

THE FEIGNED REPENTANCE OF AHAB.

1 Kings xxi. 27—29. *And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.*

MUCH there is which bears the semblance of religion, and which brings with it a present reward, whilst in the sight of God it is of no avail for the salvation of the soul. The hopes of the presumptuous, the fears of the desponding, the joys of the hypocrite, and the sorrows of the worldly, are of this kind. An instance of the last occurs in the

passage which we have just read; wherein Ahab's repentance was honoured with the notice and approbation of Heaven to a certain degree, though we have no reason to think that it ever availed for his final acceptance before God.

In speaking of Ahab's repentance, we propose to shew,

I. What there was in it that was good—

If there had not been something good in it, God would never have called the attention of Elijah to it, or have honoured it with a reward. The two principal things in it that were good, were,

1. A fear of God's judgments—

[Many, when God's judgments are denounced against them, only "puff at them"^a as unworthy of any serious regard. They do not believe that God will execute them: the language of their hearts is, "God will not do good, neither will he do evil"^b — — — But Ahab credited the predictions of the prophet, and sought deliverance from the judgments he foretold. *This* it was that prevailed in behalf of the Ninevites, when "they repented at the preaching of Jonah^c;" and God on the present occasion was so pleased with it, that he pointed it out with special approbation to the Prophet Elijah.]

2. An acknowledgment of God's justice in inflicting them—

[Had Ahab thought himself unjustly dealt with, he would have complained of the severity of the sentence that was passed against him: but he complained only of his own sins, which had so justly brought on him the divine displeasure. This was a public testimony that God was worthy to be served, and that the most exalted monarchs are bound, as much as others, to be obedient to his laws. Such an acknowledgment, from so abandoned a character, was honourable to the Lord: it "gave glory to him"^d as a God of holiness and power, and consequently was so far good and acceptable in his sight.]

Still, as it availed not for his salvation, it will be proper to shew,

II. Wherein it was defective—

^a Ps. x. 4, 5.

^b Amos ix. 10. Zeph. i. 12. Mal. ii. 17.

^c Jonah iii. 5, 10.

^d Josh. vii. 19. Jer. xiii. 16, 18.

The terms wherein it is set forth are doubtless strong; but yet it was altogether defective;

1. In its principle—

[If there had been no punishment denounced against him, Ahab would have felt little concern about his iniquities: he had no real hatred of sin, no ingenuous shame on account of his having transgressed against so good a God. It was fear, and fear only, that called forth his penitential acknowledgments. But, if his repentance had been genuine, he would have mourned for his sins even though there had been no punishment annexed to them^e; he would have seen an hatefulness in them, as transgressions of the holy law of God; and would have hated and abhorred himself on account of them, even though God should have blotted them from the book of his remembrance^f. Hatred of sin, and not fear of punishment, is the true source of penitential sorrow.]

2. In its measure—

[His repentance was expressed only by external signs, such as fasting and clothing himself with sackcloth: but it should have proceeded to operate in the renovation of his heart and life. He should have instantly begun to put away his sins. But we read not of any such effects produced upon him. He turned not from his idolatry, nor did he, as far as we know, restore the vineyard to Naboth's family. But true repentance would have led him to mortify his besetting sins^g: that alone is the repentance which is not to be repented of.]

3. In its end—

[Could Ahab have escaped the miseries he had brought upon himself, he would have been contented though God had still been as much dishonoured as ever. He had no view to God's glory, but only to his own safety. But if his sorrow had been of a godly sort, he would have inquired, how he might best counteract all the evil he had done, and cause his subjects to honour Jehovah as much as they had before slighted and despised him^h.]

Nevertheless God was pleased to reward it: and it is of importance to inquire,

III. What the honour which God put upon it was designed to teach us—

It was designed to shew,

^e Ezek. xx. 43. and xxxvi. 31.

^g Hos. xiv. 1—3, 8.

^f Ezek. xvi. 63.

^h 2 Cor. vii. 10, 11.

1. That God will not overlook the smallest things that are done for him—

[We have many instances in Scripture of actions rewarded, even where there was little, if any, reference to him in the minds of the actors. Ebed-melech had some regard to God in the services he rendered to Jeremiah the prophet: Jehu was more actuated by pride than any feeling of true piety: and Nebuchadnezzar, in his siege of Tyre, had not the least idea that he was doing Jehovah's work: yet were they all rewarded for the services they performedⁱ: and if those of us who have done the least for God would consult the records of their lives, they would find that he has in some way or other recompensed to them whatever they have done, and never long continued in their debt.]

2. That he will surely receive every true penitent—

[St. Paul, in reference to the rites of the ceremonial law, argues thus: "If the blood of bulls and of goats availed for the least things, how much more shall the blood of Christ avail for the greatest^k." In like manner we may justly say in reference to the history before us, if the feigned repentance of Ahab availed for the deferring of temporal judgments, how much more shall true repentance avail for the removal of all sins, and for the everlasting salvation of the soul! Let any one only see how God longs to behold his people returning to him^l, — — — and how he rejoices over them when they do return^m, — — — and we shall not doubt, but that instead of "willing the death of any sinner, he desires that all should turn from their wickedness and liveⁿ." "He will not despise the day of small things^o;" but will hear the groans, and regard the sighs, and treasure up the tears, of all who truly turn unto him. He never has said, nor ever will, "Seek ye my face in vain."]

We cannot CONCLUDE without a few words,

1. Of caution—

[Many there are who conceive that they have repented, because they can look back upon some time when they were humbled before God, either in an hour of sickness, or after some awakening discourse. But those temporary affections of the mind are a very small part of true repentance: they have

ⁱ 2 Kings x. 30. Jer. xxxviii. 7—10. with xxxix. 15—18. Ezek. xxix. 17—20.

^k Heb. ix. 13, 14.

^l Luke xv. 5, 9, 23, 24.

^m Jer. xlii. 27. Hos. viii. 5. and xi. 7, 8.

ⁿ Ezek. xxxiii. 11. 1 Tim. ii. 4. 2 Pet. iii. 9. ^o Hos. iv. 10.

been experienced by thousands, who yet have “turned back with the dog to his vomit, or the sow to her wallowing in the mire^p!” Let it be remembered therefore, that if we dissemble with our God, his sword shall certainly overtake us^q — — — You have been long and faithfully warned of your danger; and if you despise the admonitions of the weakest of God’s servants, it will ensure and aggravate your eternal condemnation^r.]

2. Of encouragement—

[It is not said of him in vain, that “with him there is mercy and plenteous redemption.” Do but bear this in mind, and you will frequently put yourselves in the posture of Ahab, and “walk softly” before him all the days of your life. Were it only temporal deliverance that you were authorized to expect, it would be right to mourn as Ahab did: but when God promises to multiply his pardons beyond the utmost reach of your sins^s, you may be sure that nothing shall ever be wanting to those who seek him with their whole hearts. O that God might now see in us occasion to address the angels as he did Elijah; See how those people humble themselves before me! Because they so humble themselves, and “wash in the fountain” of their Redeemer’s blood, “their iniquities shall all be blotted out,” and “cast behind me into the depths of the sea!”]

^p Ps. lxxviii. 34—37. Hos. v. 15. ^q Jer. xlii. 20—22.

^r 2 Chron. xxxvi. 12, 17. ^s Isai. lv. 7. Rom. v. 20.

CCCLIV.

FAITHFUL MINISTERS OBJECTS OF HATRED.

1 Kings xxii. 8. *I hate him; for he doth not speak good concerning me, but evil.*

IT is generally supposed that sentiments adopted by the great mass of mankind, especially if they be maintained also by those who from their personal advantages and official character are considered as best qualified to judge, must, of necessity, be right. But, whatever deference may be due to the opinions of others, we cannot concede to any man, or to any number of men, that measure of confidence which is due to God alone. Even in relation to arts and sciences, we frequently find that universally received axioms are at length exploded, and systems of a very

different aspect established in opposition to them. In religion there is but one standard, to which every thing must be referred; and how numerous or learned soever the persons may be who would impose their sentiments upon us, we must bring them all "to the word and to the testimony," and discard every thing which accords not with that unerring test. On a subject of great importance to the kings of Israel and of Judah, no less than four hundred prophets were consulted: and they all, with one voice, gave their judgment in such a way, as to flatter the pride, and gratify the inclinations, of those who consulted them. But there was one poor despised prophet, Micaiah, whom Ahab had intentionally kept in the back-ground, because he dreaded the advice which he might give: and, when inquiry was made respecting him, Ahab said, "I hate him; because he doth not speak good concerning me, but evil."

Now, though this saying had respect to one individual, and may therefore be supposed to be confined to him, the reason assigned by Ahab is of a general nature, and is applicable to all who faithfully declare the mind of God. This saying therefore of Ahab will furnish me with a fit occasion to shew,

I. The necessity imposed on every faithful minister—

A servant of God must declare the truth with fearless and impartial freedom. Fidelity is essential to his very character.

1. God requires it of us—

[Ministers are ambassadors from God, and must deliver faithfully the message intrusted to them. An unfaithful man may be called a servant of God; but he is, in fact, a servant rather of the devil, who assumes in him the appearance of "an angel of light^a." St. Paul's representation is this: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful^b." And to every such character God gives this solemn charge: "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat^c?" We are not to fear the face of man, but to

^a 2 Cor. xi. 13, 15.

^b 1 Cor. iv. 1, 2.

^c Jer. xxiii. 28.

speak the truth of God, "whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear^d." And when men say to us, "Prophecy unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits^e," our answer must be like that of Micaiah, "As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak^f." God has plainly told us, that "if we seek to please men, we cannot be the servants of Jesus Christ^g."]

2. It is of the utmost importance to all to whom we speak—

[It is to be expected that men who look to us for instruction will imbibe the sentiments we convey. And if we deceive them in relation to temporal matters, the mistake, though injurious, may be rectified: but if we mislead them in their everlasting concerns, the consequence must be fatal. It is doubtless a great misfortune to any, if, like Ahab, they be betrayed by false prophets and by blind guides: but, like Ahab, they will reap the bitter fruits of such erroneous counsels. Our blessed Lord, by a very simple figure, conveys to us this truth in a most convincing way: "If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into the ditch^h?" We cannot doubt of this, in relation to this world; nor is there any more reason to doubt of it in relation to eternity. It will be no excuse to any, especially to any who have had the Scriptures in their hands, that they were deceived. They had access to the fountain of knowledge; and they might have obtained by prayer the influences of the Holy Spirit to instruct them: and therefore they are altogether responsible for the errors they have imbibed, and for the counsels they have followed. In them will surely be fulfilled that declaration of the prophet, "The leaders of this people cause them to err; and they that are led of them are destroyedⁱ."]

3. The salvation of our own souls depends upon it—

[As from God we have received our commission, so to God are we responsible for our execution of it. In truth, so awful is our responsibility, that nothing but a conviction that "a dispensation is committed to us," and that we are "called to it by the Holy Ghost," could prevail upon us to undertake the office of ministering to immortal souls. Hear what God himself has spoken to us: "Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked

^d Ezek. ii. 6, 7.

^e Isai. xxx. 9, 10.

^f ver. 14.

^g Gal. i. 10.

^h Matt. xv. 14.

ⁱ Isai. ix. 16.

way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but *his blood will I require at thine hand*^k." Here you see, that if the consequences be fatal to others, they are doubly so to ourselves: for they who perish through our unfaithfulness, have only their own souls to answer for: but we must perish under the accumulated guilt of destroying, not our own souls only, but the souls of all that have been committed to our charge. Well does the Apostle Paul again and again make that request: "Brethren, pray for us:" for indeed we need your prayers; since we are sure to incur man's displeasure, if we are faithful; and God's displeasure, if, through any motive whatever, we shrink from a full discharge of our duty.]

Ahab's mind towards the faithful Micaiah shews to every minister,

II. The recompence he must expect for his fidelity—

It might be supposed, that in proportion to the fidelity with which he exercises his office, a minister should be loved: but by the ungodly world he will rather be hated like Micaiah, and for the very same reason, "because he doth not speak good concerning them, but evil." This hatred to him will be,

1. Invariable—

[If we go back to the beginning of the world, we shall not find one faithful minister that ever escaped the hatred of those around him. Noah "condemned the world" in his ministrations; and was regarded by them with scorn and contempt. If we ask how Moses, David, Elijah, and all the prophets were treated? our Lord has told us; "Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" As for the Apostles, our blessed Lord plainly warned them, that they also should have their cross to bear, being "hated, reviled, persecuted, for his sake." But it may be thought that our blessed Saviour could never become an object of aversion to any; since the perfection of his wisdom, and the extent of his goodness, and the efficiency of his power, would preclude a possibility of his being regarded with any feelings but those of love and gratitude. Yet, though "he spake as never man spake," and wrought miracles far more numerous than those which had been wrought from the foundation of the world, he was more an object of hatred than any other: as he says; "The world cannot hate you: but me it hateth, because I testify of it that the works thereof are evil^l." Even at this day there is not to be found

^k Ezek. iii. 17, 18.

^l John vii. 7.

on earth one faithful minister who does not experience the truth of that assertion, "If they have hated me, they will hate you also." It matters not what wisdom these servants of God exercise, or what talents they possess, or what blamelessness they maintain; if they will discharge their duty faithfully to God and man, they shall surely be made conformable to their Saviour's image in this respect: for, "if men called the Master of the house Beelzebub, much more will they those of his household."]

2. Universal—

[It is not the profane and profligate alone that will hate the servants of God; but the moral, the sober, and those who have in some respect a regard for religion. Indeed, those who are of more decent habits are, for the most part, the very leaders in opposition to the faithful ministers of Christ; inso-much that Satan found not any more willing or more efficient instruments to persecute Paul and Barnabas, than a number of "devout and honourable women^m." Bound as kings are to protect the servants of the Most High, they have often been found their most cruel oppressors. Ahab would gladly have wreaked his vengeance on Elijah, even as Jezebel had already done on a vast multitude of the Lord's prophets: and at different periods have the great and mighty of the earth exerted all their power to extirpate the servants of the Lord. From this enmity no rank or order of men is exempt: "the fat bulls of Basan" have been forward to lead the way; and "dogs have joined in compassing" about the servants of the Lord, to destroy them. Even little children have encouraged one another in this impious work. No less than forty-two of them ridiculed Elisha, saying, "Go up, thou bald head! go up, thou bald head!" expressing thereby their contempt, if not their disbelief, of the miracle that had been wrought in the assumption of the prophet Elijah in a fiery chariot to heaven. And so, at this day, we can scarcely have a surer criterion of the state of men's minds towards religion, than in the conduct of their children towards the faithful ministers of Christ. So true is that declaration of our blessed Lord to his faithful servants, "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake."]

3. Inveterate—

[There is no other thing which excites so much enmity as this. Persons guilty of any crime meet with some compassion: and, if they be treated with too much severity, they will find some to vindicate their cause. But a faithful servant of Christ may be persecuted with ever so much virulence, and none will venture to interpose for him. Ahab acknowledged

^m Acts xiii. 50.

that he had no other ground of displeasure against Micaiah, than his fidelity in declaring the messages of the Most High. And when he avowed both his hostility to him, and the grounds of it, Jehoshaphat, notwithstanding his piety, dared not to espouse the cause of this injured prophet any further, than merely to suggest, "Let not the king say so." And, when he heard the prophet doomed to imprisonment and all its attendant horrors, he uttered not one word in his defence, but left him to experience all the wrath of his vindictive persecutor. So it was with our Lord. When he stood at Pilate's bar, not one, out of the many thousands whom he had healed, would bear testimony in his favour, or endeavour to avert from him his impending doom. So it is at this day: "all manner of evil may be spoken, and spoken falsely," respecting a pious minister; and the utmost that any one will dare to say in his behalf, is, "Let not the king say so." True it is, that persecution does not rage to the same extent as formerly; but this is owing to the laws of the land, and to the spirit of toleration which has superseded the bigotry of former times: the enmity of men's hearts, if unrestrained, would break forth with the very same fury that it ever did; and the cry of "Crucify him, crucify him," would be heard, wherever the character of Christ and his Apostles was exhibited.]

Desirous, however, of approving myself to God, let me ADDRESS,

1. Those who, like Ahab, determinately follow their own way—

[Of Ahab's idolatries, I say nothing. The point before us is, his determination to follow his own way for his own temporal advantage. And need I say how common a character this is? I dare not, then, "speak flattering words" to such persons. No: "I cannot speak good concerning them, but evil." Indeed, my Brethren, God's will must be regarded by you as of paramount obligation; and, if you will not obey his voice, you must inevitably perish. Tell me not whether a Jehoshaphat concurs with you, or false prophets uphold you: if all the Jehoshaphats in the universe concur with you, or all the false prophets in the world support you, I care not for it: it is at their own peril so to do; and it is by God's word, and not by man's precept or example, that you shall be judged in the last day. Let me not, then, be deemed "your enemy, because I tell you the truth." I cannot "sew pillars to your arm-holes," or "daub your wall with untempered mortar."

"I cannot speak peace to you, when there is no peace^o." Believe me, Brethren, there is no happiness but in serving God; there is no safety but in an entire surrender of your souls to him — — —]

2. Those who are induced to make compliances which their own consciences condemn—

[Be assured that a holy firmness in the way of duty is best. Your ill-advised compliances will only bring shame and trouble to your own souls. Who can tell what might have been the result to Ahab, if Jehoshaphat had acted with the firmness that became him? He might, perhaps, have prevented all the evil that ensued. And you also, my Brethren, if you will be faithful to your God, may prove blessings to many, whom by your dissimulation and cowardice you deceive. Let every child of God consider himself as a witness for God: let him "shine as a light in a dark world:" let no consideration under heaven tempt him to be "a partaker of other men's sins." Let him "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them^p." Yea, let him rebuke sin, though he be hated for it; and act uprightly, though he be abhorred for it^q. And whatever any man may suffer for righteousness' sake, let him rejoice in the thought, that they so persecuted the prophets that were before him, and that in proportion to his sufferings will be his reward in heaven^r.]

^o Ezek. xiii. 10, 11, 16, 18. with Jer. vi. 14.

^p Eph. v. 11.

^q Amos v. 10.

^r Matt. v. 11, 12.

CCCLV.

SATAN'S STRATAGEM TO DECEIVE AHAB.

1 Kings xxii. 19—23. *And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said, I will persuade him. And the Lord said unto him, Where-with? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. Now therefore, behold, the Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the Lord hath spoken evil concerning thee.*

IN order to have a correct view of Scripture truths, we must consider particularly the style in which the Scriptures are written. They are accommodated to the weak apprehensions of fallen man. Hence in various descriptions of the Deity, he is represented as having eyes and ears and hands, and as deliberating and acting according to circumstances, just as if he were a man like unto us. But we must not therefore conceive of him as a man, but only as ordering his dispensations towards us with unerring wisdom. In like manner he is represented in the text as holding a conference with Satan, and as adopting a plan proposed by him for the effecting of purposes originating with himself. But we must not therefore suppose that God did not know how to effect his own purposes without any help from Satan: we must only understand that God overruled the devices of that wicked fiend for the accomplishment of his own will.

Indeed the particular representation here given, has an evident reference to what had actually taken place between the two confederate kings. They had put on their royal robes, and seated themselves on thrones in the midst of all their courtiers^a, in order to receive the counsel of the prophets respecting the projected war: and, agreeably to that, the prophet represents the Deity as enthroned amidst all the heavenly hosts, and holding a counsel with them about the best method of inflicting on Ahab his deserved punishment. It is not intended that we should construe this literally, as if all these questions and answers were really uttered by the different parties in a public assembly; but merely that God determined to make the designs of Ahab the means of his destruction.

There is however one point which may obviously be collected from this account, namely, *the power of Satan to deceive men*; and it will form a very profitable subject for our present consideration. Let us then inquire into,

I. The sources of his power—

^a ver. 10.

Satan has from the beginning been the great deceiver of mankind. But whence has he this power to deceive? We answer,

1. From his having so many other spirits under his command—

[The fallen angels are many in number, and so numerous, that one single person possessed by devils called himself “Legion,” because of the exceeding greatness of the number that dwelt within him. Of these there are different ranks and orders, just as there are of the good angels; and they are all united under one head, even “Beelzebub, the prince of the devils.” Of Ahab’s prophets there were four hundred; and, through the influence of one spirit, they were all possessed by spirits perfectly united with each other for the accomplishment of one end. Now this gives them an immense advantage. Had there been but one, or only a few, we might have hoped to escape their notice, or be visited by them but seldom: but there is reason to believe that they are immensely more numerous than the human race, so that there is not a human being that is not infested with them, nor a moment of time when they are not ready to take advantage of us.]

2. From his wisdom and subtlety—

[“The serpent was the most subtle of the brute creation,” and was therefore made use of by Satan as an instrument whereby to deceive our first parents: and in reference to that event, Satan is called “that old serpent, the Devil^b.” Of his subtlety there is much spoken in the Holy Scriptures. Like a fowler he spreads his net, and “takes men alive in his snare^c,” and so deep are his “wiles” and “devices,” that no human wisdom can fathom them, no human sagacity escape them. As a spirit, he is a pure intelligence, like the holy angels, disrobed indeed of his holiness, but not of his intellectual powers. He knows what is suited to the dispositions of men, and what is most likely to prevail with them under all the circumstances wherein they are placed. In his assaults on our blessed Lord, he seized the moment most favourable for his purpose, and urged the temptations most likely to prevail: and it is reasonable to suppose, that the experience of six thousand years has contributed not a little to his proficiency and advancement in every species of guile.]

3. From his easy access to the minds of men—

[A *material* being would have found difficulty in presenting himself to men on many occasions: but an *immaterial*

^b Rev. xii. 9.

^c 2 Tim. ii. 26. The Greek.

or *spiritual* being finds no obstacles, except what arise from the internal principles of those whom he would assault. He has access to one as well as another at all times. What an immense advantage does this give him! Indeed, if it were not that we have good angels also attendant on us and ministering unto us, and, above all, that we have the Spirit of the living God continually dwelling in us for the express purpose of counteracting and defeating his influence, we could have no hope whatever of escaping from his toils.]

4. From the number and influence of his confederates—

[There is not a wicked man in the universe who is not actuated by him, and made subservient to his designs: from all of them therefore he derives much support; but especially from those, whose situation in life gives them greater sway over the public mind. If he can prevail on a prince or monarch to exert his influence, he will gain a rapid ascendancy over a whole kingdom. The instant that Jeroboam set up his golden calves, the whole people of Israel “willingly ran after his commandment.” And if he can prevail on those in the prophetic office to sanction error by their preaching, or iniquity by their conduct, he will easily draw in their train the great mass of their followers. The text shews us how the united testimony of four hundred prophets deceived even the pious Jehoshaphat: and the more pretensions to piety such prophets make, the more useful to Satan will their labours be; since he never exerts himself with more effect than when he “transforms himself into an angel of light^d.”]

5. From the willingness of men to be deceived—

[This perhaps is the greatest source of his power. Men are not impartial judges of good and evil, or of truth and error: their judgment is warped: they have corrupt inclinations which bias them^e: their own “heart is deceitful and desperately wicked:” and hence, when Satan has undertaken to assault them, he finds traitors in their own bosoms ready to open the gates to him, and to admit him into the very citadel, before they are aware of his approach. The truth of this is manifested whenever an attempt is made to suppress evil or inculcate good. We see in a moment to which side men lean, and that arguments are weighed, not according to their real solidity, but according to the aspect they bear on our favourite propensities. Of course, this is extremely favourable to the interests of Satan, who needs only to present things to us in a specious view, and is sure beforehand that we shall be as ready to comply with

^d 2 Cor. xi. 13—15.

^e Isai. xlv. 20. Jer. viii. 5. and ix. 6.

his temptations, as he is to solicit our compliance. The case of Ahab is one of daily occurrence: thousands there are who hate the light, and say to their ministers, "Prophecy unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits^f." It is obvious therefore that Satan finds in the very dispositions of men the most successful advocate, and able coadjutor.]

Having seen the sources of his power to deceive, we proceed to point out,

II. The limits—

Doubtless his power is inconceivably great, since he deceived man even in his state of innocence, and from that time has "deceived the whole world^g." But his power is limited,

1. In its duration—

[Satan shall not always have the ascendant that he now has: there is a time coming, (and, we hope, at no great distance now,) when he shall "be bound, and deceive the nations no more for the space of a thousand years^h." What a blessed period will that be! What peace, and joy, and holiness will abound in the Church, when that wicked fiend shall cease from defiling and troubling the souls of men! ——— O that the happy period were arrived! May "God hasten it in his time!"]

2. In its objects—

[Wide as his influence is, it is not universal; for God has delivered his chosen people from his malignant influence. We say not indeed that there are any so delivered, but that they need to be continually on their guard against him^k. But our Lord has assured us, that "it is not possible for him to deceive the elect^l:" and the reason of this is, that God has discovered to them his devices^m, ——— and armed them against his assaultsⁿ, ——— and engaged to "guide them by his counsel, till he receives them to glory^o." ——— A further reason is, that Jesus, our all-prevailing Advocate, "intercedes for them, that their faith may not fail^p:" and hence it was, that, whilst "Satan desired to have Peter, as well as Judas, to sift him as wheat," he could prevail over him only for a season; so that Peter rose again and overcame him, whilst Judas hanged himself, and became the everlasting prey of the destroyer.]

^f Jer. v. 31.

^g Rev. xii. 9.

^h Rev. xx. 1—3, 7.

ⁱ Zech. xiv. 20, 21. with Isai. xxx. 26. and lx. 19—22.

^k Zech. iv. 1. Matt. xxvi. 41. 2 Cor. xi. 3.

^l Matt. xxiv. 24. ^m 2 Cor. ii. 11. ⁿ Eph. vi. 11.

^o Ps. lxxiii. 24. ^p Luke xxii. 31, 32.

3. In its operations—

[Satan could only “*persuade*” Ahab; he could not *compel* him; nor can he influence any man in opposition to his own will. He is “a roaring lion;” and all before him are but as lambs: yet in prosecuting his malignant purposes against them, he destroys those only “whom he *may* devour,” not those whom he *would*^a. This is a most encouraging circumstance: for, if only we cry to God for grace to desire, and strength to do, his will, we may defy all the hosts of hell: such resistance overcomes Satan, and makes him flee^r. No fiery dart that he can cast at us will pierce the shield of faith; nor all his skill enable him to withstand the sword of the Spirit^s, when wielded by a believing hand — — —]

ADVICE—

1. Guard against obstinacy in sin—

[A wilful perseverance in sin constrains God to give men over to their own lusts^t, and to leave them in the hands of their great adversary. To what a fearful extent God will proceed against us in this way, we cannot even read without horror^u. Beloved Brethren, let me entreat you not so to provoke your God, as to bring upon yourselves this fearful curse. If once God say, “He is joined to idols, let him alone^x,” it were better for you that you had never been born.]

2. Seek an interest in the Lord Jesus Christ—

[Christ has vanquished that great enemy of God and man, agreeably to what was foretold to man in Paradise^y: in the garden, and upon the cross, he vanquished him^z; and he has engaged to “bruise him under our feet^a.” Seek then an interest in his death, to ransom you; in his intercession, to preserve you; and in his grace, to strengthen you: so shall you “be more than conquerors through Him that loved you,” and shall enjoy the fruits of victory in heaven, when “the deceiver of mankind shall be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone” to receive the due reward of his exertions in everlasting torment^b.]

^a 1 Pet. v. 8. ^r 1 Pet. v. 9. and Jam. iv. 7. ^s Eph. vi. 16, 17.

^t Ps. lxxxi. 11, 12. Rom. i. 24, 26, 28. Isai. lxvi. 4.

^u 2 Thess. ii. 11, 12.

^x Hos. iv. 17. and ix. 12.

^y Gen. iii. 15.

^z Matt. iv. 10. Col. ii. 15.

^a Rom. xvi. 20.

^b Rev. xx. 10.

2 KINGS.

CCCLVI.

ELIJAH CALLS DOWN FIRE FROM HEAVEN.

2 Kings i. 11, 12. *Again also he sent unto him another captain of fifty with his fifty. And he answered and said unto him, O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly. And Elijah answered and said unto them, If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And the fire of God came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.*

MANY things recorded in the Old Testament appear at first sight to savour of harshness and severity. The utter extirpation of the Canaanites, and the judgments inflicted occasionally on the Israelites themselves, were doubtless such dispensations as we cannot contemplate without feeling that “God is very greatly to be feared.” The instance before us is of a very terrific nature; and we may be ready to wonder, how a good man could deliberately call fire from heaven to consume two whole companies of fifty each, when they had no alternative but to fulfil the orders given them, or be put to death for a violation of them. But, if any thing appear to us inexplicable, it is owing to our ignorance, and not to any inequality in the divine government. As to the conduct of Elijah, we will proceed to shew,

I. How it may be vindicated—

As being “a man of like passions with us,” he might err, and did err, on some occasions; but in this matter he did nothing that was in any wise unbecoming his high character. Consider,

1. The provocation given—

[This was exceeding great. Ahaziah walked in all the steps of his father Ahab: and this alone was abundantly sufficient to call forth the displeasure of God against him. But he had now been pouring contempt on God in a more than ordinary degree. He had fallen through a lattice, and the injury he had received was likely to prove fatal. Anxious to know what the event would be, he sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron. By this conduct he declared, not to Israel only, but even to the heathen themselves, that there was no God in Israel able to solve the question, and that the god of Ekron, a city of the Philistines, was superior to him. What an insult was this to the God of Israel, "whose name is, Jealous!" And what a tendency had this to confirm the heathen in their idolatry, and to justify them in their rejection of the true God!

Besides this, when Jehovah sent his servant Elijah to reprove the messengers, and to give them the information which they were going to seek, Ahaziah, instead of humbling himself for his offence, and preparing for his latter end, rose up in anger against the God of heaven and earth, and sent a band of soldiers to seize the prophet, in order to wreak his vengeance on him. He knew that Elijah was a most distinguished prophet of Jehovah, and yet he determined to slay him, for no other reason than because he had delivered the message which God had sent him to deliver. What was this but to contend with God himself?

But further, when the whole band with their commander were consumed by fire from heaven, the enraged king did not at all relent, but sent another, and another band, as though he was determined never to relinquish the unequal contest.

Can we wonder that God should inflict signal vengeance on such a man, and mark the evil of his conduct in the severity of his punishment?

2. The judgment inflicted—

[Fire was sent from heaven to consume the men. But could Elijah do this? or was he any other than the mere organ of the Deity, to announce the judgment, and assign the reason of it? When Moses entreated of God to interpose and shew whom he had chosen for his high-priest, fire came forth to consume all the competitors of Aaron; or when Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, with all their families, were swallowed up alive in the earth according to the prediction of Moses; was Moses the author of the judgments? The people indeed foolishly complained of him as such; but it is manifest that it was Jehovah alone, and not Moses, that inflicted these punishments on the offending people. So it was with Elijah: he did

not even pray for the judgments as one under the influence of revenge, but merely denounced them according to the will of his Divine Master. The terms in which they were denounced are worthy of notice. The captains, in calling him "a man of God," did not mean to honour, but insult him: it was as though they had said, 'Thou boastest of Jehovah as thy Master; but we come to thee in the name of a greater king than he: King Ahaziah says, Come down, come down quickly.' Then says Elijah, 'If I be a man of God, you shall have a proof of it, and of the greatness of that King whom I obey.' He had before desired fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice, and it produced no permanent effect upon them: now therefore he declares from God, that they shall be the sacrifice, and fall a prey to the devouring flames.

What was there here that can in any way reflect upon the character of Elijah? He was but the organ to declare, what a holy and offended God saw just occasion to inflict.

If it be said, that the soldiers themselves acted under the orders of another, we answer, that they could not but know the character of Elijah, who had confounded all the worshippers of Baal; and that they should rather have submitted to have military law executed upon them, than be the instruments of man to fight against God.]

3. The ends for which it was inflicted—

[Almost the whole nation of Israel had rejected God: and all the means which had been used to bring them back to their allegiance to him, had failed. Now they had an evidence which, it might be reasonably hoped, they could not withstand. The information, conveyed by Elijah to the king's messengers, was sufficient to convince both the king and his people, that Elijah's God was omniscient: and, when they still refused to acknowledge him, and rose up in arms against him, the judgment he inflicted was sufficient to convince them that he was omnipotent: and had it produced this salutary effect, the judgment, how severe soever it may appear, would have been an act of mercy. The temporal destruction of a few would have been a merciful expedient for the salvation of a whole people. If it produced not this happy effect, the fault was not in God, but in them.]

Thus justifiable in every view was this conduct of Elijah. Let us then proceed to shew,

II. How it may be improved—

As the dispensation appears dark, it may be proper to throw some further light upon it: and, when our

views of it are rectified, it will afford us some valuable lessons. We will improve the subject therefore,

1. In a way of caution—

[We must not imagine that we are at liberty to act in all things as the prophets did, or even as our blessed Lord himself did. Their peculiar office gave them an authority, which we are not called to exercise. This thought is of great importance; for, if we do not advert to it, we may think ourselves justified in a line of conduct which is most opposite to the path of duty. The Apostles themselves materially erred in this very way. They supposed that this conduct of Elijah afforded a proper precedent for them; and therefore when the inhabitants of a Samaritan village refused to receive them, they proposed to our Lord, “Wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, even as Elias did?” But our Lord said, “Ye know not what spirit ye are of: for the Son of Man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them^a.” Here our Lord rectifies their apprehensions. They were under the influence of a vindictive spirit, and were wanting to make Jehovah the avenger of their wrongs. But this was very different from the spirit of Elijah, and quite contrary both to the precepts and example of Christ. Christ was injuriously treated by all ranks and orders of men, yet did he never exert his power to destroy his enemies: on the contrary, he sought with invincible patience to convert and save them. On one occasion indeed he did, when an armed band came to apprehend him, strike them all backward with a word^b; but he only struck them *down*; he did not strike them *dead*, though he could as easily have done the one as the other: his design was to bring this history to their remembrance, and to shew them that they were fighting against God. On other occasions, he wept over the most inveterate of his enemies, and at last laid down his life for them; and, after his resurrection, commanded that the very first offers of salvation should be made to them. This then is the manner in which we are to act. We must never seek to avenge ourselves; but must rather bless them that curse us, and do good to them that despitefully use us, and persecute us. We may indeed heap coals of fire upon their heads; but it must be, to melt them into love^c. The rule that is universally established for the regulation of our conduct, is this; “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”]

2. In a way of instruction—

[Two things only will we notice under this head; namely, *The danger of persecuting the saints of God*; and, *The security of all who trust in God*.

^a Luke ix. 53—56.

^b John xviii. 6.

^c Rom. xii. 20, 21.

Behold one party slain by fire from heaven; and soon after, another party, of fifty each! What has called forth these signal acts of vengeance? They sought to lay hands on a faithful servant of the Lord. We do not indeed expect that all persecutors will be visited with the like judgments: but we know what God hath spoken respecting them; "He that toucheth you, toucheth the apple of mine eye." We know also what our blessed Saviour has said; "It were better that a mill-stone were hanged about their necks, and that they were cast into the depths of the sea, than that they should offend one of his little ones." And would it not have been better for those hundred soldiers and their captains to have been thus treated? Verily, if they had been so treated for refusing to persecute a servant of the Lord, we would have congratulated them on the occasion, as martyrs in the cause of God. Or even if they had been so treated on other accounts, still they would at least not have perished under such a load of guilt as now lay upon them. People now make a mock at religion, and turn the very names by which God designates his people into terms of reproach; and, if they were not restrained by human laws, would proceed to all the cruelties that have been practised in former times: but let it be remembered, that Christ himself is wounded in the person of his saints: as he said once to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" so now he regards his people's cause as his own, and will surely recompense into the bosoms of their enemies whatsoever shall be said or done against them. "Precious in his sight is the blood of his saints." Remember this, ye who revile and persecute the children of God: they may appear weak, and unable to avenge themselves; but "their Redeemer is mighty," and will in due time execute the fulness of his wrath upon his enemies, precisely as he did in the days of old^d.

On the other hand, he will protect his people, as he did this distinguished prophet. He will be "as a wall of fire round about, and the glory in the midst of them." Most unanswerable is that question, "Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?" If God be for them, who can be against them? "Let the weak then say, I am strong:" let them say with David, "Though *an host should encamp against me*, yet shall not my heart be afraid." In the hands of our adorable Lord we are safe, "nor can any pluck us out of them." We should not, it is true, court persecution: but if it come for the Lord's sake, we may expect to have "strength given us according to our day," and to be made "more than conquerors through Him that loved us."]

^d 2 Chron. xxxvi. 15, 16.

CCCLVII.

ELIJAH'S TRANSLATION TO HEAVEN.

2 Kings ii. 9—12. *And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof.*

RELIGION, however despised by men, has invariably been honoured by God. He has said, “Them that honour me, I will honour:” and he has fulfilled his word to all his servants in all ages. The tokens of his love and the communications of his grace have in different measures been vouchsafed unto them; and for the most part some visible manifestations of his favour have been given them, in proportion as they have visibly displayed their regard for him. On some occasions the honour conferred upon his servants has been exceeding great. Noah, Abraham, and many others, have been so distinguished by him, as to be set, as it were, above all the rest of the human race that existed in their day: and in two instances, the one before the deluge, and the other since, he has condescended to exempt from death frail mortals like ourselves; and to exalt them in their embodied state to the celestial Paradise. Of Enoch we have spoken in another place: we are now to speak of the other instance, the Prophet Elijah—

We propose to consider,

I. The translation of Elijah—

In order to get a just view of this subject, we must notice,

1. How he was occupied—

[This eminent servant of Jehovah was indefatigable in his Master's work: nor, when informed of God's gracious purpose respecting him, did he relax it, but rather abounded in it more and more.

He laboured for the public good. There were schools of the prophets, which he had established for the preservation of true religion (amidst the general defection to idolatry) in the land of Israel. These he visited at Gilgal, at Beth-el, and at Jericho, to strengthen and encourage all the students previous to his final departure from them — — — How blessed, how suitable an employment! Thus did Paul go about "confirming the churches," and exert himself with all fidelity for the good of the Ephesian church, when he knew that they were about to "see his face no more^a." Thus did Peter also, when he knew that his departure was at hand^b: and thus did our blessed Lord himself just previous to his crucifixion. What encouraging discourses were those which he delivered to his disciples^c: and how wonderfully sublime his parting prayer^d! Thus too should every servant of God exert himself as long as his Divine Master shall see fit to continue him on earth. To train up others for the same glorious service is the most acceptable office he can perform for God, and the most profitable work he can execute for man.

Nor was the prophet inattentive to the welfare of his private friends. "What shall I do for thee before I go?" was the question which he put to his servant Elisha. He knew that after his departure he could benefit his friends no longer; and therefore he would improve the present moment to the utmost of his power. How worthy of his high character was such conduct as this! How carefully should every minister, yea and every private Christian, put to himself this question, 'What more can I do, for my country? for my friends? for my very enemies? What can I do as a parent, for my children? as a master, for my family? as a friend, for my most endeared companions? as a minister, for the people committed to my charge? Is there no one who particularly needs from me a word of reproof, of consolation, of encouragement?'

The Lord grant that at whatever hour we shall be called hence, we may be found thus labouring in the way most suited to our respective spheres, and our several capacities!]

2. How he was removed—

["A fiery chariot and horses of fire," that is, angels under that appearance, were sent to convey him to heaven, without his ever tasting the bitterness of death. What a blessed change

^a Acts xx. 17—38.

^b 2 Pet. i. 12—15.

^c John xiv. xvi.

^d John xvii.

did he then experience!——But such is indeed the change which every saint experiences at his departure hence. The body, it is true, must die, and be consigned to the grave; but the soul shall be carried by angels into Abraham's bosom: and the body itself, after returning to its native dust, shall at the last day be re-united to the soul, and enjoy all that Elijah now enjoys, in the presence of its God——This was by the exaltation of Elijah assured to men: for the honour conferred on him was not that he alone should have a glorified body, but that he should possess it now, whilst others must wait for it till the resurrection of the just.]

We cannot wonder that the removal of such a man should call forth,

II. The lamentation of Elisha—

So deep and unfeigned was his grief, that he rent his clothes as the accustomed expression of it. He lamented the departure of Elijah,

1. As a private loss—

["My father, my father!" cried this afflicted saint. He regarded the departed prophet with all the reverence and affection due to a beloved parent. Indeed the prophet was his *spiritual* father; for it was by him that Elisha was first called to the service of his God: and to such there is an affection due, as much as to a *natural* parent: for to our natural parent we owe the existence of our bodies only; but to our spiritual parent, the salvation of our souls^e. And how great is the loss of one who has opened our eyes to eternal things, and by his watchful care and salutary advice has led us forward toward the possession of everlasting bliss!

It might have seemed indeed, that, as Elisha expected to receive the benefit he had asked, he needed not to have laid so much to heart the loss he had sustained: but no considerations of personal benefit ought to divest us of the finer feelings of our nature. The benefit, it is true, was exceeding great: he had asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit; that is, (regarding Elijah as his father,) *he desired to have the portion of his eldest son, which was double that of the younger children*^f: but still he had been ungrateful in the extreme, if he had not bewailed the loss of so faithful a master, and so dear a friend.]

^e Philem. ver. 19.

^f Deut. xxi. 17. with Numb. xi. 17, 25. As for his asking for twice as much as Elijah himself possessed, and actually doing by virtue of it twice as much good as Elijah did, it is all fanciful and absurd.

2. As a public loss—

[Horses and chariots composed the chief strength of armies in that day: hence Elisha, judging that now the best friend and most efficient protector of his country was gone, exclaims, "The chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!" And true indeed it is, that the faithful servants of God do deserve the character here given them. Look at Moses, and see how often he preserved the whole nation of Israel from ruin. Had there been ten pious men found in Sodom, all the cities of the plain should have been spared for their sake. Little do the world imagine how much they are indebted to the very men whom they revile and persecute: but God has declared that even one single individual who humbly intercedes for his country, may be the means of preserving it from utter destruction^g. Well then may such persons be honoured while they live, and deeply deplored when removed to a better world.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who are more advanced in life—

[The time is shortly coming when you must be taken into the presence of your God. Should you not then inquire, Whether "the good work be yet begun in you; or, if begun, whether it be proceeding towards its perfect accomplishment?" Should you not ask, What is there more that I can do for God, my neighbour, or myself? O "work while it is day, because the night cometh wherein no man can work." "There is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave whither ye go;" and therefore "whatever your hand findeth to do, ye should do it with all your might."

To ministers who are drawing near the close of their labours, this subject applies itself with peculiar force. If you see young Elishas coming forward to enter into your labours, be thankful for it; and labour, whilst yet an opportunity is afforded you, to raise up a succession of faithful ministers, who shall continue after your decease to advance the Redeemer's interests in the world.]

2. To those who are entering into life—

[Learn of Elisha to appreciate rightly the privileges you enjoy. The world will often endeavour to draw you from Christ and his faithful servants; and will say, "Tarry here, I pray thee:" but let your answer always be, 'As the Lord liveth, I will not leave either my God himself, or the ministry of his word:' in all places, and under all circumstances, I will "cleave unto my Lord with full purpose of heart." "If you have the light, then believe in the light, and walk in it,

^g Jer. v. 1. Ezek. xxii. 30.

that ye may be the children of the light." Above all, take care that your eye be single, and that spiritual blessings have their due preponderance in your hearts. If God should say to you, as in truth he does, What shall I do for thee^h? then let your soul be ever ready to reply, "Grant that a double portion of thy Spirit be given to me." Yes; let spiritual blessings be the one object of your desires; and "covet earnestly the best gifts."]

^h John xiv. 13, 14.

CCCLVIII.

ELIJAH'S GOD.

2 Kings ii. 14. *Where is the Lord God of Elijah?*

WHEN bereft of those whom we love, and with whose continuance in the world our welfare was intimately connected, we are ready to think that our *all* is gone. We forget that, while Jehovah liveth, he can repair our breaches, and make up to us all our losses. When Elijah was taken up into heaven, Elisha cried, "My father, my father! the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!" He supposed that Israel's defence was utterly departed from them. But he soon found, that God had mercy in store for Israel; and that the spirit of the departed prophet now rested upon *him*. Recovering therefore from his desponding fears, he took up the mantle which had fallen from Elijah, and, in full expectation of seeing the waters of Jordan separated by means of it, as they had just before been, he smote them with it, and said, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?"

From these words we shall take occasion to shew,

I. By what means God shewed himself to be the God of Elijah—

The whole history of Elijah might be adduced to illustrate this point: but, to avoid needless prolixity, we observe, that God shewed himself to be his God,

1. By the communications of his grace—

[Elijah was eminently endued with grace: he was *pious in the midst of a general defection*; he was *courageous under*

the most cruel persecution. The whole nation of Israel were become idolaters: but he dared to stem the torrent of iniquity, and to confess Jehovah as his God. There were indeed seven thousand persons who had not conformed to the worship of Baal; but as they were totally unknown to him, the effect, as far as it related to him, was the same as if there had not been one; because he derived no comfort from their countenance or example. But he was not contented to do what was right himself, without bearing his testimony against what was wrong. He therefore reprov'd with boldness and severity the king himself: and though on one occasion his courage seemed to fail him^a, yet on the whole he was an undaunted champion for his God, and an invincible sufferer for the truth's sake.

As for the spirit of prophecy which he had, or his power to work miracles, these were no proofs that God was his God; for then God must have been the God of Balaam, who was a prophet; and of Judas, who wrought miracles. But the graces which he exercised and maintained in the midst of a wicked generation, incontestably shewed, that he was elevated in God's esteem far above the generality of mankind.]

2. By the interpositions of his providence—

[Such was his interest with God, that by his prayers he shut up the heavens for three years and an half, and then opened them again by the same means^b. When he lifted up his voice to God, instantly came fire from heaven to consume his sacrifice^c; yea, to consume also, and that repeatedly, the enemies who were sent to apprehend him^d. While all the surrounding nations, together with Israel, groaned under the calamitous effects of a drought, he was miraculously sustained with bread and meat, twice a day for a long time together, by ravens at the side of the brook Cherith^e. When that brook failed, he was supported by a poor widow, whose barrel of meal never decreased, nor did her cruse of oil fail, till a return of rain brought plenty to the famished land^f. On another occasion (when perhaps he could least of all expect such an interposition) an angel was sent to feed him^g; and on taking a second meal of the food provided, he was enabled to go in the strength of it for forty days. Waving all mention of visions imparted to him^h, or miracles wrought by himⁱ, let us pass on to the period of his departure from the world. Then we see not only the sting of death taken away, but the law relating to

^a 1 Kings xix. 3.

^c 1 Kings xviii. 37, 38.

^e 1 Kings xvii. 3—6.

^g 1 Kings xix. 4—8.

ⁱ 1 Kings xvii. 19—23. and 2 Kings ii. 8.

^b Jam. v. 17, 18.

^d 2 Kings i. 10—12.

^f 1 Kings xvii. 9—16.

^h 1 Kings xix. 11, 12.

the dissolution of our bodies cancelled; and the man of God taken in body and soul into heaven without ever tasting of death^k; the only person thus honoured in the new world, as Enoch had been in the old world. Can we doubt but that the person for whom God so interposed both in life and in death, was a distinguished favourite of Heaven?]

Yet were not these favours from God so peculiar, but,

II. That believers at this time may expect similar tokens of his regard—

We readily grant, that no one at this day is warranted to expect a miracle; but yet every believer,

1. Shall have God for *his* God—

[God has been the God of his people in every age. He is called “The Lord God of Shem^l,” and it is needless to say how often he is spoken of as “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” That this honour was not confined to a few eminent saints, is manifest; for he is called by no name more frequently than “The God of Israel.” Indeed he has expressly covenanted that he “will be *the God* of his believing people^m,” or, as that term is varied and explained in the Epistle to the Hebrewsⁿ, He “will be *a God* unto them,” and do every thing that an Almighty Being can do for their benefit. As “he was not ashamed to be called the God of his people” of old^o, so neither will he be ashamed to be called *our* God.]

2. Shall have all the proofs of it that can conduce to his welfare—

[Think of any thing that a believer can need, for body or for soul, for time or for eternity; and we do not hesitate to affirm, that God has made it the subject of a special promise, and that it is the believer’s privilege to expect it at his hands. Do we need temporal blessings? God has said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all other things shall be added unto you^p.” Are our privations accompanied also with great dangers? “Our place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks; bread shall be given us, and our water shall be sure^q.” Do we desire that our petitions may be heard? We are reminded that “Elijah was a man of like

^k 2 Kings ii. 11.

^l Gen. ix. 26.

^m Jer. xxxi. 33.

ⁿ Heb. viii. 10. See also 1 Chron. xvii. 24.

^o Heb. xi. 16.

^p Matt. vi. 33.

^q Compare Isai. xxxiii. 16. with 2 Kings i. 10—12. and 1 Kings xvii. 3—6.

passions with us;" and are taught to conclude from the answer given to his prayers, that "the prayer of every righteous man availeth much^r." Do we need to be strengthened for our manifold trials and conflicts? "His grace shall be sufficient for us^s;" and "as our day is, so shall also our strength be^t." True, we shall not be exempt from death, or carried in a fiery chariot up to heaven: but the sting of death shall be taken away; and we shall be "carried by angels into Abraham's bosom^u." In a word, if only we seek God as our God in Christ, "he will give us grace and glory, and withhold no good thing from us" either in time or eternity^x.

What then had Elijah more than this, or what can we desire more?]

Having proved our point, we come to RECOMMEND the confident expectation expressed in the text—

[Believer, art thou just called forth, like Elisha, to face a frowning world? Fear not: take up Elijah's mantle, and smite the waters that obstruct thy path, and expect Elijah's God to open thy way before thee. Think "not any thing too hard for God." Remember that he is thy God, as well as Elijah's: and as "his ear is not heavy, that he cannot hear; so neither is his hand shortened, that he cannot save^y." See what confident expectation was manifested by God's Church of old: "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old! Art thou not it which hath dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; *that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over^z*?" Thus must you call upon your God. You cannot ask too largely, nor expect too much at his hands. If difficulties are to be surmounted, or wants to be supplied, or lusts to be subdued, go forth and say, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?"

Even to unbelievers methinks this subject is not without its appropriate use: for, who was Elijah more than others? Was not he once "a child of wrath even as others?" and may not those who are now children of wrath, become even as he? Yes, there is a cloud of witnesses to prove, that, though Elijah is gone, Elijah's God remaineth, and that he is the same gracious, merciful, loving, and almighty Friend as ever. O seek him then as your reconciled God in Christ; and you shall soon be able to say, "He is *my* God, and I will praise him; my father's God, and I will exalt him^a."]

^r Jam. v. 16—18.

^s 2 Cor. xii. 9.

^t Deut. xxxiii. 25.

^u Luke xvi. 22.

^x Ps. lxxxiv. 11.

^y Isai. lix. 1.

^z Isai. li. 9, 10.

^a Exod. xv. 2.

CCCLIX.

ELISHA HEALING THE SPRING WITH A CRUSE OF SALT.

2 Kings ii. 19—22. *The men of the city said unto Elisha, Behold, I pray thee, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord seeth: but the water is naught, and the ground barren. And he said, Bring me a new cruse, and put salt therein. And they brought it to him. And he went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus saith the Lord, I have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land. So the waters were healed unto this day, according to the saying of Elisha which he spake.*

THE miracles recorded in the Old Testament are replete with most important instruction. Many of them are typical; such as, the deliverance of the first-born through the blood of the paschal lamb; the passage of Israel through the Red Sea; the guidance of them by the pillar and the cloud; their supplies of manna from the clouds, and of water from the rock; their healing by the brasen serpent; and many others. Some, which were not strictly types, were of an emblematical nature, and well calculated to convey instruction beyond the mere exhibition of power or grace contained in them. Amongst these may be ranked the miracle which is recorded in my text. It cannot properly be considered as a type; yet, I think, it may well afford occasion for the following observations. I would observe then,

I. That there is no evil so great, but God is both able and willing to remove it—

The evil experienced at Jericho was great—

[I do not conceive that the water had originally been bad, or the ground barren: but that God had sent a curse both upon the one and the other, on account of the wickedness of those who had rebuilt the city, in direct opposition to his recorded will. Joshua having destroyed the city, had declared that the man who should presume to rebuild it should lay the foundation in the death of his first-born, and put up the gates with the loss of his youngest son. And till the days of Ahab, no one had dared to contravene the will of God respecting it. But at last Hiel, the Bethelite, presumed to restore the city:

and on him had been executed the very curse denounced by Joshua^a. At that time I suppose that the water and the ground were cursed by God, agreeably to what he had threatened by Moses^b: so that in that instance was fulfilled what David has spoken, “He turneth a fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein^c.” And certainly the beauty of the situation could but ill repay the loss sustained by the infliction of this curse. But, as the miracle shews us, God was both able and willing to remove the evil, when he was applied unto in the exercise of faith.]

But have not we far greater evils to be removed?

[Behold what has been inflicted on mankind on account of sin. How dead are the souls of men, which, at their first creation, were as living springs of all that was good! Behold, too, how barren are their lives in respect of all the fruits of righteousness, which originally, when in Paradise, were produced by them! True, indeed, there is somewhat of man’s primeval beauty still adhering to him: and if we had respect only to his faculties, as compared with all other parts of the terrestrial creation, we should say of him, “Behold how beautiful he is, as my lord seeth!” But, “his heart, alas! from whence are the issues of life,” is become “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked^d,” yea, “it is full of evil^e,” and “out of it proceed all manner of abominations^f.” As to any thing truly spiritual, it is a perfect desert; so barren, that not one “just work, or one good counsel, or one holy desire,” is produced by it. And to what a vast extent are these evils felt! Not only those who are in immediate contact with us, but the whole world, feel the bitter consequences of the change that has taken place in us, and of the curse that has been inflicted on us: and, if a remedy be not applied, the sad effects will be continued to all eternity.

And can these evils be removed? Yes, and shall be, if only we apply to God in prayer and faith.]

But in this miracle we further see,

II. That there are no means so weak, but God can render them effectual to the desired end—

How utterly inadequate were the means by which this miracle was wrought!

[There was no power in salt to render the water sweet, or the ground fertile: or, if there had been any suitableness in

^a Compare Josh. vi. 26. with 1 Kings xvi. 34.

^b Deut. xxviii. 2—4, 11, 15—18.

^c Ps. cvii. 34.

^d Jer. xvii. 9.

^e Eccl. ix. 3.

^f Mark vii. 21—23.

the means to the end, what could a single cruse of salt have effected, in a spring of water, and in all the adjacent land? and why must it be brought in a new cruse, rather than in one which had been used? It is plain that these means were no more than the erecting of a brasen serpent to heal the wounded Israelites, or than our Lord's making clay of spittle to restore to sight a man that had been born blind^g.]

Nor are the means which we use for the conversion of the world at all more adequate to the end proposed—

[How is it that we attempt to operate on men, so as to sanctify their hearts and lives? It is by the simple preaching of the Gospel to them; or, as the Apostle expresses it, “by the foolishness of preaching^h.” How little this can effect, may be seen in the ministry of the Prophets, and Apostles, and even of our blessed Lord himself. To few, comparatively, was the word accompanied with any saving power.

“Neither Paul was any thing, nor Apollos any thing:” whatever was done through their instrumentality could, if God had so pleased, been as easily effected without them, as with them. So at this day, what is any minister, but “a voice crying in the wilderness?” Yet, when God is pleased to make the word effectual, the dead are quickened, and the bond-slaves of Satan are sanctified unto the Lord. Behold, on the day of Pentecost, what a change was wrought by one single discourse, delivered by a poor illiterate fisherman! Methinks, as to any intrinsic power to produce the miracle which was wrought that day, the cruse of salt was on a par with the sermon of the Apostle. And it is no little encouragement to us to know, that no weakness of ours will be any bar to the efficacy of our ministrations, if only God be pleased to work by us: for he “has committed his treasure to earthen vessels, on purpose that the excellency of the power may be seen to be of God, and not of usⁱ.”]

It is certain, too,

III. That there is no benefit so great, but God will confer it through the ministry of his faithful servants—

What a rich benefit was that conferred by the hands of Elisha!

[We, who are accustomed to drink of wholesome springs, and to eat in rich abundance the fruits of the land, have very

^g John ix. 6.

^h 1 Cor. i. 21.

ⁱ 2 Cor. iv. 7.

little conception how great a benefit God at this time bestowed on Jericho. There was from that time no more death in the water, or barrenness in the land. Even after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, the spring continued both abundant and salubrious, as the Jewish historian informs us; yea, and to this very hour it so remains, as modern travellers have attested.]

But what was that benefit, in comparison of the blessings conferred on us by the Gospel?

[The blessings of salvation itself are imparted to us by the preaching, the simple preaching, of Christ crucified. Who can estimate this benefit? Think of a new heart being given to us, and a new spirit renewed within us. Think of the whole life and conversation as so changed, that in the place of the brier grows up the fir-tree, and instead of the thorn grows up the myrtle-tree, and all the fruits of righteousness abound to the praise and glory of God. Yet shall this be wrought through the ministry of the word, in every place, and in every heart, where the Gospel is faithfully administered, and humbly received. Yes, it is not to one town or country that this mercy shall be vouchsafed, but to every country under heaven, where the Gospel comes: nor shall the benefits be continued only through the contracted span of this life, but through the endless ages of eternity. Not that it is to be expected to any great extent, except through the intervention of his ministers: for he delights to honour his own ordinances, and his own servants, whom he has sent to minister his blessings to mankind. He might have healed the springs of Jericho, without either the use of salt, or the agency of Elisha: and so he may impart salvation to men without the ministry of a preached Gospel: but it is only in the use of his appointed means that we are authorized to expect his proffered blessings. Nevertheless, if we use the appointed means in faith, we may expect, from the abundance of his mercy, every benefit which our souls can desire.]

ADDRESS those who feel their need of God's merciful intervention—

[The men of Jericho had neglected to avail themselves of the presence of Elijah, who was now for ever withdrawn from them: and it was only through the unforeseen circumstance of Elisha waiting for the return of the men who had been sent to search for Elijah, that he was detained there a few days. Now, therefore, they seize the opportunity afforded them, and beseech his intercession with the Deity in their behalf: and thus they obtain the benefit which they so greatly needed.]

Beloved Brethren, think how many opportunities you have

lost of obtaining salvation to your own souls — — — But, blessed be God! the word of the Gospel yet sounds in your ears, and God is at this moment waiting to confer on you all the blessings both of grace and glory. But how long the advantages you now enjoy may be continued to you, or you be continued to possess them, God alone knows. Methinks what our Lord said to his hearers may now be addressed to you; “A little while is the light with you: walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you. While ye have the light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light^k.” And who can tell what benefits may accrue to distant ages, if you yourselves obtain these blessings to your souls? — — —

To those, especially, who are now before me, I would say, Cry mightily to God that the cruse of salt may be cast into this fountain, from whence so many streams are issuing^l; that being rendered salubrious, they may fertilize this whole land, and be the means of diffusing life and salvation to the remotest corners of the globe.]

^k John xii. 35, 36.

^l The University.

CCCLX.

ELISHA MOCKED BY THE CHILDREN.

2 Kings ii. 23, 24. *And he went up from thence unto Beth-el: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.*

THOUGH the ministry of the word in its original purpose was intended only for the happiness of man, it but too frequently proves an occasion of his more aggravated misery. That great Prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to enlighten and save the world, was “set no less for the fall, than for the rising, of many in Israel.” In like manner St. Paul was to some “a savour of life unto life; but to others, a savour of death unto death.” Thus the Prophet Elisha, who, in healing the waters of Jericho, not only conferred upon Israel a great temporal benefit, but shewed what benefit he was sent to

confer on their souls also, was speedily constrained to call down judgments upon the people whose welfare he was most anxious to promote.

The destruction of so many children for what appears to have been but a small offence, has afforded to infidels an occasion of triumph. But that this dispensation affords no just ground of complaint either against the God of Israel or his holy prophet, will appear, if we consider,

I. The sin committed by the children—

In their treatment of the prophet we behold a mixture,

1. Of contumely—

[The name of “bald head” was not, it is true, any bitter invective; but it was intended as a reproach; and the evil of such reproaches consists, not in the term that is used, but in the intent of him that uses it. Opprobrious language used to any one is sinful^a; but as used on this occasion, it was an insult to God himself. The mocking of a poor man on account of his poverty is considered by God as a reproach offered to himself, who has appointed him his lot^b: much more therefore was this contemptuous treatment of the prophet an insult to that God, who had called him to the prophetic office. This is plainly declared by our blessed Lord^c; and it is confirmed by a similar testimony from the Apostle Paul^d.]

2. Of profaneness—

[The expression “Go up, go up,” evidently refers to the recent ascension of Elijah in the fiery chariot: and it intimated, that his translation was regarded by them either as *a fiction to be disbelieved*, or *an event to be despised*. In either of these views, their guilt was exceeding great: for how could they disbelieve what was immediately attested by that stupendous miracle, the forming a dry passage through Jordan by a stroke of Elijah’s mantle? It is true, that many of the people of Jericho doubted at the time, and desired Elisha to send fifty men to search for his master, lest he should have been cast upon some mountain or valley: but that very doubt, like the unbelief of Thomas, tended only to confirm the fact that had been denied: and consequently the continuance of unbelief became so much the more criminal, in proportion as the evidence had been increased to confirm the fact.

^a Matt. v. 22.

^b Prov. xvii. 5.

^c Luke x. 16.

^d 1 Thess. iv. 8.

But it is probable that the fact, though believed, was deemed a fit subject for ridicule; ‘Let us see thee, O thou bald head, go up, as thy master did.’ Thus the very abundance of God’s power and grace was turned into an occasion of profane banter. And, strange as it may seem, this is a very common source of ridicule among the ungodly world. Goodness in itself is not made a ground of contempt; but as proceeding from God, as illustrating his perfections, and as conducing to his glory, it is an object of general derision. What terms, for instance, are more frequently used as expressive of contempt than “the elect,” “the saints,” and such like? And why are they so used, but because the sovereignty and the holiness of God are implied in them? Such reproaches then most assuredly strike at God himself, who estimates them by a very different standard from that which we use: we view them as a facetious exposure of folly; but he views them as an impious contempt of the Lord our God.]

We have a clear proof of the malignity of the offence in God’s sight, from,

II. The judgment inflicted on account of it—

In a two-fold light must that judgment be regarded;

1. As a punishment to them—

[We must not suppose that the judgment was inflicted by Elisha; or that he was actuated by a vindictive spirit in denouncing it. He was no more able to inflict it, than Moses was to send the ten plagues of Egypt, or than Elijah was to bring fire from heaven to consume the bands who came to apprehend him: nor was he any more under the influence of revenge, than Peter was when he passed sentence of death on Ananias and Sapphira; or than Paul was when he declared that Elymas, the sorcerer, should be struck blind. He was merely an organ whereby the Deity denounced his curse against them: and the she-bears out of the wood, like the whole creation, animate and inanimate, were ready to execute the vengeance of God upon them. As the locusts and frogs came up over Egypt at God’s command, or the lion came forth to slay the disobedient prophet, or “the winds and storms fulfilled his will” in arresting Jonah in his flight; so these bears received their commission from God, and executed his commands.]

Now this punishment was strictly just: for, what greater dishonour could be done to the God of heaven and earth than to make the most stupendous efforts of his goodness a subject of reproach? As it respected the parents, they deserved to

lose those children which they had trained up in such impious habits; and the children deserved to be cut off from all further enjoyment of the privileges which they so despised. For the transgressions of their parents they might well have suffered, even as the children of Sodom and Gomorrha did: but their own iniquities richly merited the displeasure they experienced^e.]

2. As a lesson to the world—

[Truly in this dispensation were many valuable lessons contained.

It shewed *that smaller acts of persecution, as well as greater, will be noticed by God*. It might be thought a light matter to revile a servant of God; but did God account it so in the instance of Ishmael? He “mocked Isaac,” as professing himself to be the child of promise, and the heir of Canaan: and for that sin both he and his mother were cast out from the house of Abraham^f. This conduct of his is by St. Paul expressly called *persecution*, and is set forth as illustrative of the way in which carnal men still persecute the children of God, and of the everlasting exclusion from heaven which they shall suffer for their impiety^g. St. Jude also, having declared that there will be “mockers” in the Church, tells us what fearful ruin they must expect from the hands of an angry God^h. To all therefore who are disposed to deride either religion itself or those who profess it, we would say with the prophet, “Be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strongⁱ.”

Another lesson which this judgment teaches us is, *that young persons, as well as adults, are objects of just retribution*. We readily acknowledge that the criminality of our actions is deep, in proportion as our light is clear, and our judgment matured. But we must not on that account imagine that God will take no notice of the evils committed by young persons: we have here an awful instance to the contrary. We are told in Scripture, that a young person who shall despise his earthly parents, shall be visited with some heavy calamity^k: and shall God be so careful of the honour of earthly parents, and not be jealous of his own? Shall young people insult *him* with impunity? O let them not suppose that their youth is any excuse for their misconduct: for, if they are old enough to know what is right, they are old enough to do it: and “to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin^l.” On the other hand, if they will employ their tongues in praising and magnifying their Redeemer, they shall receive from him a rich recompence of reward^m.

^e 2 Chron. xxxvi. 16.

^f Gen. xxi. 9.

^g Gal. iv. 29, 30.

^h Jude, ver. 15, 18.

ⁱ Isai. xxviii. 22.

^k Prov. xxx. 17.

^l Jam. iv. 17.

^m Matt. xxi. 15, 16.

The last lesson we shall notice as arising from this dispensation is, *that parents and children have a fearful responsibility for their conduct towards each other.* Doubtless it sometimes happens that the most pious parents have children whom they cannot prevail upon to serve the Lord: and, if they have laboured faithfully for their good, they shall not be held responsible for their faults. But wicked parents can expect nothing but that their children shall tread in their steps: and the truth is, that young children are for the most part only an echo of their parents' sentiments. What a shocking reflection then will it be to parents, that their children perished through their neglect; or to children, that they persisted in wickedness in opposition to the instructions, example, and entreaties of their parents! Parents, think how you will bear to look upon your children in the future world; and how they will one day execrate your conduct towards them, and call for vengeance on your heads for neglecting to warn them of their evil ways! And, children, think how, if you have disobeyed the voice of your parents, you will execrate your own folly, when you see an impassable gulf between them and you! Reflect a moment on the terror that seized the children the very instant the bears rushed forth upon them; and the distress which came upon their parents when they heard of the calamity that had befallen them. This may serve as an image, though a very faint image, of the terror and distress in which negligent parents and ungodly children will be involved to all eternity. The Lord grant that this may prove a salutary warning to us all!]

CCCLXI.

THE KING OF MOAB SACRIFICES HIS SON.

2 Kings iii. 27. *Then he took his eldest son that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt-offering upon the wall.*

GOD delights to honour prayer; and often withholds the blessings which he has purposed to bestow, till he shall have been "inquired of by us concerning them^a." In the preceding context we are informed that Moab had rebelled against Israel, and that the kings of Israel, of Judah, and of Edom united their forces in order to reduce them to their former state of subjection. In prosecution of this purpose they were left of God to adopt such measures as nearly

^a Ezek. xxxvi. 37.

proved fatal to the confederate armies. They attempted to pass through the wilderness of Edom, where they were in danger of perishing for want of water. Then, but not till then, did they think of making their application to Jehovah. Jehoshaphat, a pious king, proposed it, and the other two from the pressure of their necessity united in it. Elisha, doubtless by the gracious appointment of Providence, was in the camp at the time; and at the request of the three kings, undertook to lay their case before the Lord. The Lord bade him inform them that he would not only give them a miraculous supply of water, but would deliver the Moabites into their hands. The supply of water, without the intervention of any natural cause, was given; and the Moabites, mistaking the reflection of the sun upon the water for blood, supposed that the confederate armies had destroyed each other; and going therefore securely to take the spoil, were themselves destroyed. The remnant of them with their king taking refuge in a fortress, the king brought forth his eldest son, and offered him for a burnt-offering in the sight of all his enemies. We shall,

I. Inquire into the reasons of this extraordinary act—

Reduced to the greatest extremity, he resorted to this expedient,

1. To propitiate his gods—

[The gods of the heathen are supposed to delight in sacrifices, and to regard them in proportion to the worth and estimation of them in the minds of the offerers. Hence they are supposed above all to be pleased with human sacrifices: and hence their votaries have offered to them even their own sons and daughters, with the hope of conciliating their favour. Even the Israelites themselves, when they had departed from their God, practised these impious and cruel rites^b. The king of Moab, now looking to his gods for help, presented to them as an offering his own, his eldest son, as being confessedly of more value, and dearer to himself, than all that he possessed. Whilst we lament that Satan should have ever so blinded the eyes of men, we cannot but be filled with

^b Ps. cvi. 37, 38.

shame when we reflect, how little we have ever sacrificed to our offended God. We all know that he has abundant reason to be displeased with us: and we know that “a broken and contrite spirit is a sacrifice which he will never despise:” but how few of us are willing to offer it! how few are at all anxious about his favour, or will exercise any self-denial in order to obtain it! Will not that ignorant heathen rise up in judgment against us? — — —]

2. To intimidate his enemies—

[He offered his son “upon the wall” in the sight of all his enemies. What an idea did that give them of his determination to sacrifice every thing rather than surrender to his enemies, and to sell his life as dear as possible! We cannot doubt but that this act of his was publicly known amongst the besiegers as well as the besieged: and, methinks, it must strike them all with horror to reflect, that they had driven him to such an awful act of desperation; and no doubt it tended also to inflame the hatred of his own subjects against them to the uttermost. We are told indeed that this effect ensued; for “they had great indignation against Israel;” who being the principals in the war, (whilst the other two kings were only allies,) were the more immediate objects of their resentment^c. And certainly the expedient so far succeeded, that his victorious enemies “departed from him, and returned to their own land.”]

Having seen the reasons of that extraordinary act, we proceed to,

II. Suggest some reflections naturally arising from it—

We observe then,

1. How great are the calamities of war!

[Dreadful indeed were the evils inflicted on the land of Moab: “the cities were beaten down; every good piece of land was marred with stones; the wells were all filled up; and every good tree levelled with the ground.” True it is that these judgments were inflicted by the command of God; and therefore the agents who inflicted them were blameless: but the warfare which has so long desolated Europe, and especially

^c The burning of Moscow by the Russians, on Buonaparte’s invasion of Russia in 1812, to prevent it from being serviceable to their enemies, was an act somewhat similar, and tended not a little to convince the French that the complete conquest of Russia would be no easy matter. In fact, it produced the same effect as the expedient of the king of Moab did; it caused his enemies to depart, without pursuing any further the advantages they had already gained.

that which has recently been carried on in its more northern states, has partaken much of the same spirit, and proved almost equally fatal to the happiness of millions. What reason then have we to bless our God, that, notwithstanding all the menaces of our enemies, this happy land has not been made the theatre of war! And with what alacrity should we contribute for the relief and comfort of our suffering allies! — — Let us learn to sympathize even with our enemies, and to moderate our joy at the victories we obtain, by feelings of compassion for the miseries we inflict.]

2. How pitiable is the ignorance of the heathen!

[Who can forbear to pity that afflicted king, who had recourse to such an unnatural expedient as that of murdering his own son in order to pacify the deities he adored? Yet such are the methods by which the heathen almost universally endeavour to appease their gods. When once they begin to ask, “Wherewith shall I come before my god?” they proceed to say, “Shall I give my first-born for my transgression; the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul^d?” Even amongst our fellow-subjects in India, there are thousands, perhaps many thousands, sacrificed every year, under the idea that such offerings are pleasing to the gods whom they worship. Should we hear of such transactions then with indifference? Should not a holy zeal be stirred up within us, to turn the heathen, if possible, from those vanities, to serve the living and true God? O that we felt for the honour of God, and for the good of man, as we ought to do; and that they especially who call themselves ministers of Christ were more willing to spend and be spent in the service of their Lord! Alas! how few are those that are willing to forego their carnal ease and worldly interests, to save their benighted and perishing fellow-creatures! A call to accept a lucrative situation is soon acknowledged and easily obeyed: but God may call us long enough to go and labour among the heathen, and we neither regard his voice, nor listen to his proposals. If ever there was a time that peculiarly called for missionary exertions, methinks this is that time: for never was there such a zeal for disseminating the Holy Scriptures as at this time; never were so many societies raised up to consider the state both of Jews and Gentiles, as at this moment. This alone is a call from God to contribute, each according to his ability, to the advancement of our Redeemer’s kingdom, and to the salvation of a ruined world.]

3. How rich are the provisions of the Gospel!

[We all, as sinners, have reason to fear, that God is dis-

^d Mic. vi. 7.

pleased with us. But we need not sacrifice an eldest son to avert his wrath: no: blessed be his name! he himself has given us "a Lamb for a burnt-offering," even his only dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This sacrifice was once offered on Mount Calvary; and it was offered, not to intimidate, but encourage us; not to menace us with ruin, but to open for us a way of everlasting salvation. With this sacrifice he was well pleased: he smelled a sweet savour at the very instant it was offered; and from respect to it, he is reconciled to his most inveterate enemies. What thanks do we owe to God for such a wonderful provision as this! How delightful should it be to us to hear, that "God spared not his own Son, but delivered HIM up for us all!" Let us dwell upon the joyful sound: let us put away all those vain hopes which we are apt to substitute in the place of this: and let us look to Christ for all the ends and purposes for which he was sent. *Are we afraid that God is angry with us?* let us seek reconciliation with him through the blood of our adorable Redeemer. *Are we desirous of repelling all our spiritual enemies?* let us "be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might:" let us "resist the devil" in the strength of Christ, and "he will flee from us." In Christ there is all that we can stand in need of. We are expressly taught to say, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength." "In him therefore let us rejoice always;" for, as "in him we shall be justified, so in him we should glory^e."]

^e Isai. xlv. 24, 25.

CCCLXII.

THE WIDOW'S OIL INCREASED.

2 Kings iv. 6. *And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed.*

FROM every event recorded in the Old Testament, there is much useful instruction to be derived. For instance, it is impossible to read with attention the account of the miracle before us, and not to see, that, in our deepest extremity, God is able and willing to relieve those who trust in him. But there are often minute incidents, which a superficial reader is apt to overlook, but which, to a considerate mind, suggest very important reflections. Of this kind is

the incident mentioned in my text: the increase of oil continued as long as there was a vessel left to contain it; but when there remained no more a vessel to receive the oil, the supply ceased. So remarkable a circumstance as this cannot have occurred without a special design on the part of God that we should make a suitable improvement of it: and, that we may draw from it the instruction which it is well calculated to convey, I shall mark,

I. The bounty of God towards this insolvent widow—

Certainly her distress was great—

[She was the widow of a pious minister. Her late husband was one of the sons of the prophets: and so decided had been his piety, that she could appeal to the prophet himself, "Thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord." He had died in debt; not through any extravagance of his: for a man that will run into debt for the purpose of indulging his pride and vanity, has no pretensions to real piety. Piety would teach him to "owe no man any thing," and to deny himself any gratification rather than obtain it at the expense of common honesty. But in the days of Ahab and Jezebel, when a hundred prophets were hid by fifties in a cave, and fed with bread and water, at the expense of a single individual, to prevent their falling into the hands of their blood-thirsty persecutor, we wonder not that a pious minister should be involved in debt. And, indeed, at any time a man may be so oppressed with misfortunes or with sickness, as to preclude a possibility of avoiding debt, especially if he have, like this man, a wife and family to maintain.

But, to add to her affliction, she was warned by her creditors, that they would take her two sons, and sell them for bond-men. *This* the law enabled them to do^a: and this would exceedingly augment her trouble, since to her widowhood and poverty would be added the loss of her sons, who were her only hope and support.

Under this heavy calamity she applied to the Prophet Elisha; who, though not able to relieve her himself, might possibly obtain relief for her from God.]

The relief afforded her, through the instrumentality of Elisha, was fully adequate to her necessities—

[The prophet interrogated her as [†] he means which were

^a Lev. xxv. 39, 40. Matt. xviii. 25.

yet left her of discharging her debts : and being informed that nothing remained to her but a pot of oil, he directed her to borrow as many vessels as she could of her neighbours, and, with her doors closed in order to avoid the distraction which might be occasioned by impertinent curiosity, to pour out the oil into the vessels, under a full assurance that it should be so multiplied as to prove a supply for all her wants. The event fully answered her expectations : and in one hour she had enough to pay all her creditors, and to support herself and family for the future. Thus, in the hour of her necessity, did she experience the truth of that proverb, "In the mount the Lord shall be seen."]

But the point to which we wish more particularly to draw your attention is, the stopping of the supply, when there were no more vessels to be filled. And this, whilst it shews how large God's bounty is, shews also,

II. Whence it is that we also are not more enriched by it—

Our state accords in a measure with that of the insolvent widow, inasmuch as we are loaded with a debt which we can never discharge, and are threatened with everlasting bonds as the just consequence of our insolvency. But from God do I declare,

1. That relief shall be afforded you—

[God is both *able* and *willing* to relieve all who call upon him. He is *able*; as the Apostle has said: "God is able to make *all* grace *abound* toward you; that ye, *always* having *all-sufficiency* in *all* things, may *abound* unto *every* good work^b." And to God he ascribes all glory, in that precise view: "Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end, Amen^c." And He is as *willing* as he is able. It is for this very end that he has treasured up in Christ all fulness for us, that out of it we may receive to the utmost extent of our necessities^d. In Christ is "the residue of the Spirit^e;" whom he has "received without measure^f," on purpose that he may impart of it unto us, even to the most rebellious amongst us^g.]

2. That if we receive not to the fullest possible

^b 2 Cor. ix. 8.

^c Eph. iii. 20.

^d Col. i. 19. John i. 16.

^e Mal. ii. 15.

^f John iii. 34.

^g Ps. lxxviii. 18.

extent of our necessities, it is “not in God that we are straitened, but in ourselves^h”—

[Most free are the invitations given us to come and receive God's blessings “without money and without priceⁱ.” And so largely is our Saviour willing to bestow them, that “they should be in us a well of water springing up unto everlasting life^k.” Yea, to all, without exception, does he make an offer, that, if they come unto him for the waters of life, “out of their belly shall flow rivers of living water.” “And this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive^l.” He is represented by the Prophet Zechariah as an inexhaustible fountain, even as that golden bowl which by golden pipes supplies with golden oil every lamp in God's sanctuary^m. He bids us “open our mouth wide, that he may fill itⁿ.” He assures us that we may “ask what we will, and it shall be done unto us^o,” and that “according to our faith it shall be done unto us^p.” Why, then, have we for the most part so scanty a supply of God's Holy Spirit? The reason may be seen in the conduct of king Joash. Elisha had told him that he should destroy the Syrians who had oppressed him: and he bade the king to strike the ground with the arrows which he had in his hand. The king, being deficient both in faith and zeal, struck the ground only three times, and thereby greatly incensed the prophet against him; and was told, that the mercy promised should be reduced to the scale which he himself, by his want of zeal, had dictated: for he should smite the Syrians only thrice; whereas, if he had struck the ground five or six times, he should have utterly consumed them^q. Thus, if we were more urgent in our prayers, and more enlarged in our expectations, who can tell what supplies of the Holy Spirit we might obtain? Verily I speak not too strongly, if I say, that God would “pour him out so abundantly upon us^r,” that we should “be filled with all the fulness of God^s.”]

This, then, I would DESIRE of you, my Brethren:

1. Beg of God to make you sensible of your wants—

[You are not a whit less indigent than that insolvent widow. But the testimony of faith is weak in comparison of that of sense. You see how bent she was on obtaining relief: let me entreat you to follow her steps in this respect; and to

^h 2 Cor. vi. 12.

ⁱ John vii. 37—39.

ⁿ Ps. lxxxii. 10.

^q 2 Kings xiii. 15—19.

^k Isai. lv. 1.

^m Zech. iv. 1—6, 11—14.

^o John xv. 7.

^r Tit. iii. 6.

^k John iv. 14.

^p Matt. ix. 29.

^s Eph. iii. 19.

ask of God himself, who has promised to “supply all your wants *acording to his riches in glory* by Christ Jesus^t.”]

2. Assign no limits to the supplies which he will afford you—

[See what God did on the day of Pentecost: three thousand were converted in one hour! And why should not his grace abound in like manner towards *us*? He has said, that “a nation shall be born in a day^u,” and that “when he shall breathe upon the dry bones, the dead shall arise a whole army^x.” Enlarge, then, your expectations, to the utmost extent of God’s power and grace. And, if a doubt arise whether your insignificance or unworthiness shall not divert his attention from you, or arrest his arm, know, and be assured, that no father upon earth would so readily supply the wants of his first-born child, as God would fulfil your desires in the gift of his Holy Spirit to your souls^y. “Ask, and ye shall receive; and your joy shall be full^z.”]

^t Phil. iv. 19.

^u Isai. lxvi. 8.

^x Ezek. xxxvii. 9, 10.

^y Luke xi. 13.

^z John xvi. 24.

CCCLXIII.

CONTENTMENT ILLUSTRATED IN THE SHUNAMITE.

2 Kings iv. 13. *What is to be done for thee? Wouldest thou be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the host? And she answered, I dwell among mine own people.*

“TO be content with such things as we have” is a very rare acquirement. Every one imagines that some change of circumstances, and especially some addition to his fortune, will increase his happiness. But the answer of the Shunamite to the Prophet Elisha may well dissipate this delusion. She, in concurrence with her husband, had provided accommodation for the prophet, that, when he was proceeding on his journeys in the discharge of his ministerial office, and should have occasion to visit Shunem, he might have a place of repose under her roof. The prophet, sensible of her great kindness, and thankful for all the care she had taken of him, proposed to do any thing she might wish for the promotion of her interests. He offered to speak for

her to the captain of the host, or even to the king himself, if he might thereby obtain for her and her husband any thing that might conduce to their comfort. But she declined his kind offer, saying, "I dwell among mine own people," and possess in my intercourse with them all that my heart can desire.

Now this was a wise and good reply. It commends itself to us as the dictate of a sound judgment,

I. On the principles of worldly wisdom—

Advancement in the world was offered her, but she preferred,

1. A state of independence to a state of obligation—

[No man should be ashamed of a state of dependence, or of being indebted to the kind offices of others, if God has put him into a situation that requires it. God has ordained that there shall be a great diversity in the conditions of men, on purpose that every species of virtue may be called forth into act and exercise; in the poor, contentment, and in the rich, a liberal and tender sympathy. But to be needlessly dependent upon others is most disgraceful. No man should subsist on alms when he is able to support himself. It was a blessing which God promised to his obedient people, when he said, "Ye shall lend to many nations, but shall not borrow; since by the one they would be the head, whereas by the other they would be in the degraded situation of the tail^a." It was a virtuous pride therefore in this woman to decline a state of dependence, when God had given her a sufficiency for independence.]

2. A state of competency to a state of affluence—

[She had food and raiment; What could she have more? An abundance of the things of this life is usually productive of care, and always exposes us to temptation; whilst yet the possessor of it has "no other benefit from it than that of beholding it with his eyes^b." Why then should any man affect worldly advancement? "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possesseth^c." True wisdom therefore dictates to every man the advice, which Jeremiah gave to Baruch, "Seekest thou great things unto thyself? Seek them not^d."]]

^a Deut. xxviii. 12, 13.

^b Eccl. v. 11. See also Ps. xxxvii. 16. Prov. xv. 16. Eccl. iv. 6. Matt. vi. 25—30.

^c Luke xii. 15.

^d Jer. xlv. 5.

3. A state of domestic quiet to all the happiness that arises from external and adventitious circumstances—

[It is a great mistake to imagine that happiness can be found in amusements of any kind. They involve no small measure of trouble in the pursuit of them, and they almost always issue in disappointment. At all events they are but “as the crackling of thorns under a pot,” which blaze for a moment, and then expire in smoke and darkness^e. But in filling up our station in life with diligence, and administering to the welfare of all around us, there is real happiness. However much we diversify the objects of our pursuit abroad, we never attain any solid satisfaction: “The eye is never satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing^f.” But, when we move in our domestic circle, like the sun in its course, diffusing light and comfort all around us, we possess that state of peaceful tranquillity, which, for a continuance, is the most enviable frame on earth.]

If in a mere worldly view, and on the principles of common sense, this woman’s choice was commendable, much more was it so,

II. On the principles of Christian piety—

Let two things only be considered;

1. How little can any worldly things add to the happiness of a believing soul!

[Pleasure, riches, and honour are the great objects of men’s idolatrous regard. But what pleasure can the world afford in comparison of “that peace which passeth all understanding,” and that “joy which is unspeakable and glorified,” both of which are the believer’s portion from day to day? And what are gold and silver when compared with “the unsearchable riches of Christ,” which are ministered even to the poorest and meanest of God’s saints? What, too, are the most elevated titles upon earth, when put in competition with that of being “sons of God, and joint-heirs with Christ?” If we could imagine two angels sent from heaven, one to rule an empire, and the other to sweep the streets, they would be equally happy in discharging the offices assigned them, because they would have no happiness but in God. And so it is with us, in proportion as we are renewed by divine grace: we shall, “in whatsoever state we are placed, be therewith content,” and, whilst “having nothing, consider ourselves as possessing all things.”]

^e Eccl. vii. 6.

^f Eccl. i. 8.

2. How entirely our future abundance depends on our present moderation!

[We are told by our Lord that "The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and render it unfruitful:" and we see in Demas this sad effect: "Demas hath forsaken us, having loved this present evil world." The things of this life are as "thick clay to the feet" of one who is running a race, or as "a long garment" that impedes his every step. Hence we are told to cast off both the one and the other, that we may "so run as to obtain the prize." Now no one would doubt the wisdom of complying with this advice when striving for an earthly crown; nor can any one doubt it in reference to the spiritual "race that is set before us." Hence, when the question was put to David, "Who will shew us any good?" he replied, "Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us^g."]

Seeing now that this Shunamite's choice was so wise, let us INQUIRE,

1. Whence it is that this disposition is so rare—

[She improved for the Lord the property she possessed. She spent it not on carnal gratifications, but devoted what she could to pious uses. Now by acting on that principle we suppress all worldly-mindedness, and attain a superiority to all covetous desires. But how few do act on that principle! How few regard their property as given them of the Lord for the carrying on of *his service*, and for the promotion of his glory! Hence it is that worldly advancement is so coveted; and that few, with such prospects as were now opened to this pious woman, would have the wisdom or the fortitude to follow her example.]

2. How we may attain it—

[Nothing will so soon or so effectually deliver us from worldly desires, as the acquisition and experience of heavenly joys. Our Lord told the Samaritan woman that "whosoever should drink of Jacob's well, would thirst again; but that whosoever should drink of the water that he would give, should never thirst." And so we find it invariably. "By the cross of Christ, the world will become crucified unto us, and we unto the world." Let us then "set our affections on things above, and not on things on the earth:" so shall we both advance our happiness here, and secure a more exalted happiness in the realms above.]

^g Ps. iv. 6.

CCCLXIV.

ALL THE DISPENSATIONS OF PROVIDENCE ARE GOOD.

2 Kings iv. 26. *And she answered, It is well.*

TO serve the Lord with our talents is the best possible improvement of them. Even as it respects this life, we never exert ourselves truly for God without receiving from him, in some way or other, an abundant recompence. Behold the pious Shunamite: being provided richly with the good things of this life, she gladly imparted of them to the Prophet Elisha; and, with her husband's approbation, provided for him a comfortable accommodation in her house. The prophet, full of gratitude, desired to requite her kindness, and for that end would have exerted his influence with the king in any way that she should desire: but her contented disposition rendered all such services unnecessary. There was, however, one service which he might render. She had no child, which to a Jewish woman was a great calamity: and he might intercede with God to bestow upon her this blessing. Accordingly he did so, and prevailed: and thus her generous hospitality was richly rewarded. But she had a still better reward in her soul: for under an exceedingly deep affliction, she was enabled to make the declaration in our text, "It is well."

In considering this declaration, we shall notice,

I. The circumstances under which it was made—

This son had no sooner arrived at an age to render himself amusing to his parents, than he was removed by sudden death. In great affliction the mother set off instantly to the prophet; who, seeing her at a distance, sent immediately to inquire after the welfare of herself, her husband, and her child: and to each inquiry she replied,—"It is well."

Behold here,

1. Her resignation—

[Her affliction would have been great, if she had had other children left: but to lose her only son, her son miracu-

lously given, and to have him so suddenly snatched away, was a calamity which might have utterly overwhelmed her. That she felt deeply was manifest, from the manner in which she prostrated herself at the prophet's feet, and from the plea she urged with him to intercede in her behalf: "Did I desire a son of my lord? Did I not say, Do not deceive me?" that is, If I had indulged an inordinate desire after this blessing, I might well have expected this severe chastisement: but when it was given me unsolicited, as a reward for my attentions to thee, surely it was not given merely to mock me, and to augment my sorrows. But, notwithstanding the anguish of her mind, she was enabled to leave the matter in God's hands, and to say, "It is well." Thus did she tread in the steps of Aaron^a, of Eli^b, of David^c, and of Job^d; and afforded an example of patience to the Church in all ages.]

2. Her faith—

[She had not indeed any promise to rest upon; but she had a persuasion that God was gracious, and would hear the prayers of his servant in her behalf. Hence it was that she put the child upon the prophet's bed, and hastened with such speed to him, and pleaded her cause with him in such an affecting manner. In this view the history before us is referred to in the Epistle to the Hebrews; "By faith women received their dead raised to life again^e:" and in this noble exercise of faith, she approved herself a true daughter of Abraham, who offered up his son Isaac, from a persuasion "that God was able to raise him up again, even from the dead^f." This divine principle calmed her spirits and composed her mind: and, wherever the same principle exists, it will produce a similar composure, in proportion as its operation is encouraged and felt.]

Her declaration was scarcely more the language of faith than it was of prophecy; as appears from,

II. The events whereby it was verified—

The prophet instantly complied with her request, and sent his servant Gehazi to lay his staff upon the face of the child, with a view to his recovery. But in this he appears to have acted without any direction from God, and without that humble reference to God which the occasion demanded: and therefore God rebuked him by not accompanying the attempt

^a Lev. x. 3.

^b 1 Sam. iii. 18.

^c Ps. xxxix. 9.

^d Job i. 21.

^e Heb. xi. 35.

^f Heb. xi. 17—19.

with his blessing. The prophet, finding that his desire had failed, sought the Lord with all humility and earnestness; and, by means similar to those which had before been successfully used by Elijah, he obtained of God the restoration of the child to life^g. Who now must not acknowledge the truth of the mother's declaration? Verily, "it was well," and the dispensation, though afflictive, was good,

1. As exercising and confirming her graces—

[How would it have been known that she possessed the graces of faith and resignation, if somewhat had not occurred to call them forth? and how could they have been strengthened, if not exercised? The pruning of the vine is therefore good, because it tends to augment its fruitfulness^h; and the putting of the choicest vessel into a furnace is good, as tending to fit it for the master's useⁱ. Thus is "tribulation good, as working patience, experience, and hope^k." Hence we are authorized rather to congratulate the saints upon their trials, than condole with them^l: and the universal testimony of God's people, after they have come out of their troubles, accords with that of the Psalmist, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted^m."]

2. As displaying and magnifying God's perfections—

[This trial of hers occasioned an application to God in her behalf: and how marvellous did the condescension of God appear in listening to the voice of his servant, and in granting his petitions! How glorious too was the display of his *power*! And was not a momentary suffering good, when it was an occasion of bringing so much glory to Jehovah? Is there a saint in the universe that would not gladly endure even more than that, for the attainment of so blessed an end? St. Paul desired nothing so much as that God might be glorified in him; and, provided his Lord and "Saviour might only be magnified in his body," he was indifferent whether it were "by life or by deathⁿ." And, wherever the love of God is shed abroad in the heart, not even life itself will be dear to us, except as it may be improved, or sacrificed for him.]

^g Compare ver. 34, 35. with 1 Kings xvii. 21. The gestures were used, not as means to an end, but as emblematic of the blessing desired.

^h John xv. 2.

ⁱ 2 Tim. ii. 21.

^k Rom. v. 3—5. Heb. xii. 11.

^l Jam. i. 2, 3. and v. 11. Rom. viii. 28. ^m Ps. cxix. 67, 71.

ⁿ Phil. i. 20.

ADVICE—

1. Be not hasty to judge the dispensations of Providence—

[God's ways are in the great deep; his footsteps are not known: and often those very dispensations, of which we are ready to say with Jacob, "All these things are against me," are in reality the greatest blessings that God can bestow. Behold the case of Job; how glorious was the issue of his trials! And, if we could see the end from the beginning as God does, we should pronounce a similar verdict on every trial that we are called to endure. The forty years' sojourning in the wilderness was a dark dispensation; yet we are told, "God led his people in the *right* way:" so he leads us also in the *right* way; and when we get to heaven we shall bless him as fervently for all the troubles we sustained, as for any comfort we ever enjoyed.]

2. Be not backward to improve them—

[Every trial has a voice to us, and is calculated to teach us some important lesson^p. Hence the prophet says, "Hear the rod, and him that hath appointed it^q." Consider then what it is intended to speak to you: take occasion from it to examine your ways, to see wherein you may have erred, or wherein you may amend your ways. Thus will every event be made a blessing to your souls; and Samson's riddle be verified in you; "Out of the eater you will bring forth meat, and out of the strong you will bring forth sweet."]

^p Job xlii. 11—16.

^p Job xxxiii. 14—17, 29, 30.

^q Mic. vi. 9.

CCCLXV.

NAAMAN HEALED OF HIS LEPROSY.

2 Kings v. 13. *And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?*

MEN universally claim a right to "do what they will with their own;" but they are extremely averse to concede that right to God. Indeed there is scarcely any doctrine against which the carnal heart rises with such acrimony, as against the sovereignty of God. Nevertheless we must maintain that the

Governor of the universe ordereth every thing after the counsel of his own will, and dispenseth his gifts “according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself.” He once chose the Jews for his peculiar people, not for the sake of any righteousness of theirs, but because he had ordained that he would magnify his grace in them: and for the same reason has he now transferred his favours to the Gentiles. Our Lord, in his first sermon at Nazareth, warned his hearers, that, if they rejected his gracious overtures, the blessings of his Gospel should be transferred to the Gentile world: and, to shew them how futile all their objections were, and how delusive their hopes of impunity in sin, he reminded them, that God had in many instances vouchsafed mercy to Gentiles, not only in conjunction with his people, but even in opposition to them: for that there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha; but them had God overlooked, whilst he shewed mercy to Naaman the Syrian^a.

The history to which our Lord referred, is that which is contained in the chapter before us: which we propose to consider,

I. In a way of literal interpretation—

Under the pressure of a leprosy, which was an incurable disorder, Naaman, the Syrian, applied to Elisha for a cure. Doubtless every thing that the Syrian physicians could devise had been tried, but to no purpose. It happened however that an Israelitish maid, whom the Syrians had taken captive, was living in the service of Naaman; and that she, knowing what great miracles had been wrought by Elisha, suggested, that by an application to him her master might be restored to health. The idea being suggested to Naaman, he determined without delay to apply for a cure. This he did erroneously at first to the king of Israel; but afterwards to Elisha himself: but through his own folly and wickedness he nearly lost the benefit which he was so eager to

^a Luke iv. 27.

obtain: for, instead of following the direction given him by the prophet, "he turned, and went away in a rage^b." Here let us pause to inquire, what it was that so nearly robbed him of the desired blessing? It was,

1. His offended pride—

[He had come in great state, and with rich rewards in his hand, to the house of a poor prophet: and the prophet had not deigned to come out to him, but had only sent him word what he must do in order to a cure. This was considered by Naaman as an insufferable insult. In his own country he was regarded with the utmost deference; and was he now to be treated with such indignity by a contemptible Israelite? No: he would not listen for a moment to a message sent him in so rude a way.

Alas! what an enemy to human happiness is pride! How acute are its feelings! how hasty its judgment! how impetuous its actings! But thus it is with all who have high ideas of their own importance. They stop not to inquire whether any insult is intended; but construing every thing according to their own conceptions, they are as full of resentment on account of a fancied insult, as they would be if they had sustained the greatest injury: and in many instances do they sacrifice their most important interests to this self-applauding, but delusive, passion.]

2. His disappointed expectation—

[Naaman had formed an idea of the manner in which the prophet would effect the cure: nor do we at all condemn the notions he had formed. But what right had he to be offended because the cure was not wrought with all the formalities that he had pictured to himself? If he received the benefit, did it signify to him in what way he received it? or had he any right to dictate to the prophet and to God, in what way the cure should be wrought? Yet behold, because his own expectations were not realized, he breaks out into a passion, and will not accept the blessing in God's appointed way.

This throws a great light on innumerable occasions of offence which are taken even among good people. We paint to ourselves the way in which we think others ought to act; and then, because they do not answer our expectations, we are offended. We forget that another person may not view every thing in precisely the same light that we do, or have exactly the same judgment about the best mode of acting under any given circumstances; and yet, as though we were infallible, and the

^b ver. 12.

other person were in full possession of our ideas, we are offended at him for not acting as we would have him; when most probably we ourselves, had we been in his situation, should not have followed the line of conduct which we had marked out for him. It is surprising how much disquietude this mistaken spirit occasions in men's own minds, and how many disagreements it produces in the world.]

3. His reigning unbelief—

[Though Naaman came expecting that a miracle should be wrought by the prophet, yet would he not use the means which the prophet prescribed. He did not expect the effect to be produced by the power of God, but by the mere act of washing in a river; and then he concluded, that the rivers of his own country were as competent to the end desired, as any river in Israel. Thus, because he saw not the suitableness of the means to the end, he would not use the means in order to the end, notwithstanding they were so easy, and so safe.

It is thus that unbelief continually argues: ‘God, I am told, would do such and such things for me, if I would apply to him in the use of such and such particular means: but what can those means effect?’ This is an absurd mode of arguing: for, when God commanded Moses to smite the rock with his rod, did the promised effect not follow, because a stroke of his rod could not of itself produce it? God can work equally by means or without means; and whatever he prescribes, that it is our wisdom to do, in full expectation that what he promises shall surely be accomplished.

When Naaman was made sensible of his folly, and complied with the direction of the prophet, then his disorder vanished; and “his flesh became like the flesh of a little child.” And thus shall we find in relation to every thing which God has promised, that “according to our faith it will be unto us.”]

We now proceed to consider this history,

II. In a way of spiritual accommodation—

We are not in general disposed to take Scripture in any other than its true and primary sense: though, as the inspired writers occasionally take passages of Holy Writ in an accommodated sense, we feel it to be a liberty which on some particular occasions we are warranted to take. We think it would be too much to say that this history was *intended* to shew how the Gentiles are to be washed from the guilt of sin; but sure we are that it is well adapted for that end: and, as the leprosy was certainly a type of sin,

and the mode of purification from it was certainly typical of our purification from sin by the Redeemer's blood, we feel no impropriety in accommodating this history to elucidate the Gospel of Christ.

We have here, then, a lively representation of,

1. The character of the Gospel—

[Sin is absolutely incurable by any human means: but God has "opened a fountain for sin and for uncleanness;" and has bidden us to "wash in it and be clean:" he has even reasoned with us, as Naaman's servants did with him, saying, "Come now, let us reason together; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow; though they be red as crimson, they shall be as wool." In all the word of God there is not a more beautiful illustration of the Gospel method of salvation than this. We are simply required to wash in the blood of Christ by faith; and in so doing we shall immediately be cleansed from all sin. And with this agrees the direction given to the jailer, (the only one that can with propriety be given to one who inquires after the way of salvation,) "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."]

2. The treatment it meets with—

[Multitudes not only disregard it, but turn from it with disgust. In their eyes, the direction, "Wash and be clean," "Believe and be saved," is too simple, too free, too humiliating.

It is too simple. What! have I nothing to do, but to believe? Will this remove all my guilt? it cannot be — — —

It is too free. Surely some good works are necessary to prepare me for the Saviour, and to make me in some measure worthy of his favour. Must I receive every thing without money and without price, and acknowledge to all eternity that it is altogether the free gift of God in Christ Jesus, as free as the light I see, or the air I breathe? I cannot but regard such a proposal as subversive of all morality.

Lastly, It is too humiliating. Must I no more bring my good deeds than my bad ones, and no more hope for mercy on account of my past life than publicans and harlots can for theirs? This is a mode of righteousness which I never can, nor will, submit to^c.

Now persons who argue thus against the Gospel, are not unfrequently full of indignation against it, and against all who believe it. If called upon to do some great thing for the Gospel, they would engage in it gladly, and do it with all their might: but, if invited to accept its benefits by faith

^c Rom. x. 3.

alone, they resent the offer as a wild conceit and an Antinomian delusion.]

From the striking resemblance which there is between the conduct of Naaman and that of those who reject the Gospel, we shall take occasion to add a few words of ADVICE—

1. Bring not to the Gospel any pre-conceived notions of your own—

[Every man, of necessity, forms to himself some idea of the way in which he is to obtain acceptance with God: but when we come to the Holy Scriptures, we must lay aside all our own vain conceits, and sit at the feet of Jesus, to learn what he has spoken, and to do what he has commanded. We must not dictate to God what he shall say, but with the docility of little children receive instruction from him.]

2. Let not passion dictate in matters of religion—

[Many who hear perhaps a single sermon, or even a single expression, are offended, and shut their ears against the truth from that time. But, if candid investigation be ever called for, surely it is required in the concerns of religion; where the truths proposed must of necessity be offensive to the carnal mind, and where the consequences of admitting or rejecting them must so deeply affect our everlasting welfare.]

3. Be willing to take advice even from your inferiors—

[Naaman, under the influence of pride and passion, thought himself right in rejecting the proposals of the prophet: but his servants saw how erroneously he judged, and how absurdly he acted. Thus many who are our inferiors in station or learning may see how unreasonably we act in the concerns of our souls, and especially in rejecting the Gospel of Christ. The Lord grant that we may be willing to listen to those who see more clearly than ourselves, and be as ready to use God's method of cleansing for our souls, as Naaman was for the healing of his body!]

4. Make trial of the method proposed for your salvation—

[No sooner did Naaman submit to use the means prescribed, than he derived from them all the benefit that he could desire. And shall any one go to Christ in vain? Shall any one wash in the fountain of his blood in vain? No: the most leprous of mankind shall be healed of his disorders; and the wonders of Bethesda's pool be renewed in all that will

descend into it. Only remember that you must wash there *seven times*. You must not go to any other fountain to begin or perfect your cure: in Christ, and in Christ alone, you must seek all that your souls can stand in need of.]

CCCLXVI.

NAAMAN BOWING IN THE HOUSE OF RIMMON.

2 Kings v. 18, 19. *In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing. And he said unto him, Go in peace.*

THE operation of divine grace is uniform in every age and place: it makes a total revolution in the views and habits of the person in whom it dwells. See how it wrought on Naaman! Before he felt its influence he was full of pride and unbelief; and notwithstanding his request for the healing of his leprosy was granted, yet because it was not granted in the precise way that he expected, he would not comply with the directions of the prophet, but “turned, and went away in a rage.” But, when his leprosy was healed, and in conjunction with that mercy the grace of God wrought powerfully upon his soul, he returned with most heartfelt gratitude to the prophet, renounced his idol-worship, and devoted himself altogether to the God of Israel. At the same time however that he embraced the true religion, he made a request, which has been differently interpreted by different commentators; some vindicating it as illustrative of a tender conscience, and others condemning it as an indication of an unsound mind.

We think that great and learned men are apt to judge of particular passages, according as their own general views and habits of life incline them: those who are lax in their own conduct, leaning too much to a laxity of interpretation; and those who are strict in their principles, not daring, as it were, to concede

to men the liberty which God has given them^a. But we should neither abridge the Christian's liberty, nor extend it beyond its just bounds: and we apprehend that the passage before us will assist us materially in assigning to it its proper limits, and will itself receive the most satisfactory interpretation when viewed according to its plain and obvious import.

We propose then to consider,

I. The concession here made—

We do not hesitate to call Elisha's answer a concession. To regard it as an evasion of the question is to dishonour the prophet exceedingly, and to contradict the plainest import of his words. His answer is precisely the same as that of Jethro to Moses^b; and must be interpreted as an approbation of the plan proposed to him. Let us consider then the true import of Naaman's question—

[Naaman proposed to continue in the king of Syria's service, and to attend him as usual to the house of Rimmon, the god whom his master worshipped: and as his master always leaned upon his arm on those occasions, (a practice common with kings at that time, even with the kings of Israel, as well as others^c,) he must of necessity accommodate himself to his master's motion, and bow forward when he did, in order not to obstruct him in his worship. This he proposed to do; and his communication of his intentions to the prophet must be understood in a two-fold view; namely, *As an inquiry for the regulation of his judgment, and as a guard against a misconstruction of his conduct.*

The case was certainly one of great difficulty, and especially to a young convert, to whom such considerations were altogether new. On the one hand, he felt in his own mind that he should not participate in the worship of his master; and yet he felt that his conduct would be open to such a construction. Having therefore access to an inspired prophet, he was glad to have his difficulty solved, that so he might act as became a servant of Jehovah, and enjoy the testimony of a good conscience.

Being determined, if the prophet should approve of it, so to act, he desired to cut off all occasion for blame from others. He knew how ready people are to view things in an unfavourable

^a We conceive that few Christians in the world would have approved of the statement in Rom. xiv. if it had not been contained in the inspired volume.

^b Exod. iv. 18.

^c 2 Kings vii. 2, 17.

light; and that, if he should do this thing of himself, he might appear to be unfaithful to his convictions, and to have relapsed into idolatry: he therefore entered, as it were, a protest against any such surmises, and gave a public pledge that he would do nothing that should be inconsistent with his professed attachment to Jehovah.

In this view of the subject, his question was every way right and proper. The honour of God and the salvation of his own soul depended on his not doing any thing that should be inconsistent with his profession; and therefore he did right to ask advice: and lest he should by any means cast a stumbling-block before others, he did well in explaining his views and intentions beforehand. What terrible evils had well nigh arisen from the neglect of such a precaution, when the tribes of Reuben and of Gad erected an altar on the banks of Jordan^d! — — — On the other hand, what evils were avoided, when Paul explained his sentiments in the first instance *privately* to the elders of Jerusalem, instead of exciting prejudice and clamour by a hasty and indiscriminate avowal of them in public^e! It is thus that we should act with all possible circumspection, not only avoiding evil, but “abstaining as much as possible from the very appearance of it^f,” and not only doing good, but endeavouring to prevent “our good from being evil spoken of^g.”]

The import of the answer given to it—

[This answer is not to be understood as a connivance at what was evil, but as an acknowledgment that Naaman might expect the divine blessing whilst pursuing the conduct he had proposed. Can we imagine that Naaman at that moment saw the thing to be evil, and yet desired a dispensation to commit it? Did he, at the very moment that he was rejecting all false gods, and acknowledging Jehovah as the only true God, and determining to build an altar to Jehovah in his own country, and desiring earth from Jehovah’s land to build it upon, did he *then*, I say, at *that* moment ask for a licence to play the hypocrite? and can we suppose that he would confess such an intention to Elisha, and ask *his* sanction to it? or can we imagine that Elisha, knowing this, would approve of it, or give an evasive answer, instead of reprobating such impiety? Assuredly not: the request itself, as made on that occasion, must of necessity have proceeded from an upright mind; and the prophet’s concession is an indisputable proof, that the request, made under those particular circumstances, was approved by him. Elisha saw that Naaman was upright: he knew that

^d Josh. xxii. 9—34.

^f 1 Thess. v. 22.

^e Gal. ii. 2.

^g Rom. xiv. 16.

the bowing or not bowing was a matter of indifference in itself; and that, where it was not done as an act of dissimulation, nor was likely to be mistaken by others as an act of worship, it might be done with a good conscience; more especially as it was accompanied with a public disavowal of all regard for idols; and arose only out of the accidental circumstance of the king leaning on his hand at those seasons. In this view of the subject, the prophet did not hesitate to say to him, "Go in peace."]

Such, we are persuaded, was the concession made. Let us now proceed to consider,

II. The instruction to be gathered from it—

The more carefully we examine this concession, the more instructive will it be found. We may learn from it,

1. How to determine the quality of doubtful actions—

[Many actions, such as observing of holy days, or eating meats offered to idols, are indifferent in themselves, and may be good or evil, according to circumstances. Two things, then, are to be inquired into, namely, *The circumstances under which they are done*; and, *the principles from which they flow*.

Had Naaman acted from a love to the world, or from a fear of man, his conduct would have been highly criminal: or, if by accommodating himself to the notions of the king he would have cast a stumbling-block before others, he would have sinned in doing it: but *with his views*, and *under his circumstances*, his conduct was wholly unexceptionable.

In this sentiment we are confirmed by the conduct of St. Paul. St. Paul, when taking Timothy with him as a fellow-labourer, circumcised him in order to remove the prejudices of the Jews, who would not otherwise have received him on account of his father being a Greek: but, when required to circumcise Titus, he refused, and would on no account give way; because a compliance in that case was demanded as a necessary conformity with the Mosaic law, which was now abolished. In both these cases he acted right, because of the difference of the circumstances under which he acted. So, when he "became all things to all men," he acted right, as well in conforming to legal observances as in abstaining from them, because his principle was right^h: whilst Peter, on the contrary, sinned in a very grievous manner by conforming to the Jewish prejudices, because he acted from fear, and not from love. We do not mean to say, that every action which proceeds from a good principle,

^h Acts xxi. 22—26. and 1 Cor. ix. 19—22.

is therefore right ; for, *no principle, however good, can sanctify a bad action, though a bad principle will vitiate the best of actions*ⁱ: but an investigation of the principle from which an action flows, accompanied with an attention to the circumstances under which it is done, will serve as the best clew whereby to find what is really good, and to distinguish it from all specious and delusive appearances.]

2. How to act in doubtful cases—

[Circumstances must sometimes arise, wherein it is difficult to draw the precise line between good and evil : and in all such cases we shall do well to consult those, whose deeper knowledge, and exalted piety, and more enlarged experience qualify them for the office of guiding others. We are ourselves liable to be biassed by passion or interest ; and are therefore oftentimes too partial judges in our own cause. Another person, divested of all such feelings, can generally see more clearly where the path of duty lies. We shall always therefore do well to distrust ourselves, and to take advice of others^k: but, above all, we should take counsel of the Lord. He has promised, that “the meek he will guide in judgment, the meek he will teach his way :” and, though we are not to expect a voice from heaven to instruct us, or a pillar of fire to go before us, yet may we hope for such an influence of his Spirit as shall rectify our views, and be, *in effect*, an accomplishment of that promise, “Thou shalt hear a voice behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left^l.”

If, after much deliberation we cannot make up our minds, it is best to pause, till we see our way more clear. The commandments given us by God himself on this point, are very express: “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind:” “Happy is the man who condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth; for he that doubteth is damned (condemned) if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith, is sin^m.” But, if we are upright in our minds, and inquire of others, not to get a sanction to our own wishes, but to obtain direction from the Lord, we shall certainly not be left materially to err ; and for the most part, we shall at all events enjoy the “testimony of our own consciences, that with simplicity and godly sincerity we have had our conversation in the worldⁿ.”]

3. How to deal with tender consciences—

ⁱ See Haggai ii. 12, 13.

^k See how the Church of old acted, Acts xv. 1, 2.

^l Isai. xxx. 21. ^m Rom. xiv. 5, 22, 23. ⁿ 2 Cor. i. 12.

[The prophet did not begin to perplex the mind of Naaman with nice distinctions; but, seeing the integrity of his heart, encouraged him to proceed; not doubting but that, as occasions arose, God himself would "guide him into all truth." Thus should we also deal with young converts^o: we should feed them with milk, and not with meat, which, on account of their unskilfulness in the word of righteousness, they would not be able to digest^p. There may be many things proper for them both to know and do at a future period, which, under their present circumstances, need not be imparted, and are not required. We should therefore deal tenderly towards them, being careful not to lay upon them any unnecessary burthen, or exact of them any unnecessary labours; lest we "break the bruised reed, and quench the smoking flax:" our endeavour rather must be to "lift up the hands that hang down, and to strengthen the feeble knees, and to make straight paths for their feet, that the lame may not be turned out of the way, but may rather be healed^q." This was our Lord's method^r—— and an attention to it is of infinite importance in all who would be truly serviceable in the Church of Christ.]

Lest this subject be misunderstood, we shall conclude with answering the following QUESTIONS:

1. May we ever do evil that good may come?

[No: to entertain such a thought were horrible impiety: and if any man impute it to us, we say with St. Paul, that "his damnation is just^s." But still we must repeat what we said before, that things which would be evil under some circumstances, may not be so under others; and that whilst the question itself can admit of no doubt, the application of it may: and we ought not either to judge our stronger, or despise our weaker, brethren, because they do not see every thing with our eyes^t; for both the one and the other may be accepted before God, whilst we for our uncharitableness are hateful in his sight^u.]

2. May we from regard to any considerations of ease or interest act contrary to our conscience?

[No: conscience is God's vicegerent in the soul, and we must at all events obey its voice. We must rather die than violate its dictates. Like Daniel and the Hebrew youths, we must be firm and immovable. If a man err, it will never be imputed to him as evil that he followed his conscience, but that he did not take care to have his conscience better informed.

^o Rom. xiv. 1.

^p John xvi. 12. 1 Cor. iii. 2. Heb. v. 11—14.

^q Heb. xii. 12, 13.

^r Matt. ix. 14—17.

^s Rom. iii. 8.

^t Rom. xiv. 3—6.

^u Rom. xiv. 10, 18.

We must use all possible means to get clear views of God's mind and will; and, having done that, must then act according to our convictions, omitting nothing that conscience requires, and allowing nothing that conscience condemns. The one endeavour of our lives must be to "walk in all good conscience before God," and to "keep a conscience void of offence towards God and man."]

3. May we on any account forbear to confess Christ?

[No: we must shew, before all, our love to the God of Israel, and our communion with his people. In every place where we go, we must erect an altar to our God and Saviour. "If on any account we are ashamed of him, he will be ashamed of us;" and, "if we deny him, he will deny us." Nevertheless we are not called to throw up our situations in life, because there is some difficulty in filling them aright: we are rather called to approve ourselves to God in those situations, and to fill them to the glory of his name. We must indeed take care that we are not led into any sinful compliances in order to retain our honours or emoluments; but we must avail ourselves of our situations to honour God, and to benefit mankind.]

CCCLXVII.

THE HYPOCRISY OF GEHAZI.

2 Kings v. 21, 22. *So Gehazi followed after Naaman. And when Naaman saw him running after him, he lighted down from the chariot to meet him, and said, Is all well? And he said, All is well.*

IN the preceding chapter we have seen a similar inquiry made by Gehazi himself; and a similar reply from the Shunamite, who came in quest of Elisha^a. The answer as made by her, under her most afflictive circumstances, justly fills us with admiration: but the answer as here given, calls forth our severest indignation. Naaman, when he saw Elisha's servant running after him, was afraid that something was amiss; and therefore asked with great anxiety, Is all well? The hardened villain, one might have hoped, should have relented at the sight of Naaman's simplicity: but that same wicked spirit who put the evil

^a 2 Kings iv. 26.

into his heart, furnished him with a ready answer, "All is well." Now this answer is of considerable importance;

I. As illustrating the character of Gehazi—

[Previous to this we have nothing that gives us any particular insight into the character of Gehazi. He lived with a pious master, enjoyed the benefit of his instructions and example, and was an eye-witness of the miracles he wrought. One might have hoped therefore that he was impressed with a sense of true religion. But in this answer we see that he was a subtle, self-deluding hypocrite.

As far as related to the general scope of Naaman's inquiry, the answer was true: but was it true, as conveying all that Gehazi intended to convey? or would Naaman have thought it true, if he could have seen all that was in the heart of this vile impostor? Was all well, when thou wast coming on so base an errand? when thou hadst fabricated such a falsehood? and wast making it an occasion of such dishonest gain? Was all well, when thou wast so belying thy master, so dishonouring religion, casting such a stumbling-block before Naaman, and bringing such guilt upon thine own soul? Did not thine own conscience reprove thee, when thou thus confidently daredst to assert, All is well?

From thy composure on the occasion it was evident, that thou expectedst to reap the fruit of thine iniquity in peace; and that, when thou repliedst, "All is well," thou apprehendedst no evil. But didst thou forget that God saw thee? Didst thou forget that he noteth down every thing in the book of his remembrance, and will bring it forth at the last day in order to a final retribution? Didst thou forget that even now God could reveal thy wickedness to his prophet, and punish it by some heavy judgment? Hadst thou known at that moment that thy master's eye was upon thee, and that in less than an hour afterwards the leprosy of Naaman would cleave to thee, and that it would be the wretched inheritance of thy children to their latest posterity, wouldst thou then have said, that All was well? Above all, if thou couldst have realized thine appearance at the bar of judgment, and the sentence that there awaited thee, wouldst thou *then* have said, All is well?

But so it is that sin blinds the eyes of men, and hardens their hearts: nor is there any passion in the human mind, which, if suffered to gain an ascendant over us, may not produce in us the very same effect. The ambition of Absalom, the envy of Cain, the malice of Esau, the revenge of Jacob's sons, the covetousness of Judas, the lewdness of Herod, sufficiently shew, that, where there is some professed regard

for religion, a predominant lust will soon break down the barriers of conscience, and bring into subjection every better principle — — —]

Let us now contemplate the answer,

II. As affording some valuable lessons to the world at large—

The great improvement which we are to make of Scripture history, is, to deduce from every part of it lessons for our own instruction. Now from the conduct of Gehazi we learn,

1. That such characters must be expected to exist—

[If in the house of Elisha, his only servant was such an impostor; if even among the Apostles of our Lord there was a Judas; yea, and if among the very first Christians immediately after the day of Pentecost such a deceiver as Ananias was found; what reason have we to be surprised, if such characters exist in our day? Is not human nature now the same as ever it was? And has not our Lord taught us to expect, that, wherever the seed of his word is sown, the enemy will sow tares; and that no effectual separation of the tares can be made till the last day? Doubtless it is most distressing when any are found to act unworthy of their Christian profession; but the wonder is rather that so few hypocrites are found, than that some occasionally are detected in the Church of Christ.]

2. That the existence of such characters is no argument against true religion—

[People are apt to impute the misconduct of hypocrites to the doctrine they profess. But is there any thing in the Gospel that tends to encourage hypocrisy? Is not every branch of morality carried to its utmost height in the Gospel, and required as an evidence of our faith in Christ? Are all who embrace the Gospel hypocrites? Was Elisha a hypocrite because his servant was so? What would Naaman have said, if he had been dissuaded from embracing Judaism because he had been imposed upon by a Jew? Would he not have said, 'The man's wickedness must rest on his own head: religion does not stand or fall with him: I am myself a monument of Jehovah's power and grace, and am under the most unspeakable obligations to him; and, if all that profess his religion were hypocrites, it would be no reason why I should not worship him in spirit and in truth?' Thus then must we say, "Offences will come; and woe be to those by whom they come:" but whilst I know myself to have been a leper, and

feel that the Lord Jesus Christ has healed me of my leprosy, I must love him as my Benefactor, and serve him in the presence of the whole world.]

3. That in whatever light men now appear, they will ere long be seen in their true colours—

[Gehazi little thought that his master's eye was upon him during the whole transaction: but his iniquity was soon exposed, and fearfully punished. Thus, in whatever place we be, God's eye is upon us. In vain do we say, "Tush, God shall not see;" for he does see even the most secret recesses of our hearts: and the time is quickly coming, when he "will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart."

Let not any of us then deceive our own souls. Let *those who declaim against hypocrites* remember, that, if they seek not after God, the hypocrisy of others will be no justification of their neglect: there is but one rule of judgment for all, and by that shall every man be justified or condemned^b.

But let *those in whom hypocrisy of any kind is found*, tremble for themselves; for their guilt is heinous, and their condemnation will be proportionably severe. "If there be woe to the world because of offences, much more will there be to him by whom the offence cometh." Against every sin therefore I would most earnestly caution you, but more especially against that which ensnared Gehazi. "The love of money is the root of all evil, and drowns many in destruction and perdition^c." This is most particularly the sin to which persons professing godliness are apt to be addicted, and under which they are most satisfied with their own state^d: but, whatever profession they may make, they deceive themselves to their eternal ruin.]

^b Isai. iii. 10, 11.

^c 1 Tim. vi. 9, 10. 2 Tim. iv. 10. 2 Pet. ii. 14, 15.

^d Ezek. xxxiii. 31.

CCCLXVIII.

ELISHA PROTECTED BY CHARIOTS OF FIRE.

2 Kings vi. 15, 16. *And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not; for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.*

IT has been justly said, that a servant of God is immortal, till his work is done. He will indeed be

exposed to many dangers; and probably to more, in proportion as his zeal is exercised in the service of his Lord: but the promise made to Jeremiah is fulfilled to every faithful champion; "They shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee." The prophet Elisha eminently experienced this blessed truth. He had been enabled by God on different occasions to reveal to the king of Israel the plans which the king of Syria had laid for his destruction. The king of Syria at first thought that his plans were all betrayed by some confidential servant of his own: but when he learned that they were revealed by God to the prophet Elisha, he determined to destroy the prophet; and for that end he sent not a small band, such as had failed in apprehending Elijah, but a large army to besiege the city wherein he was. This was effected with such rapidity, that the city was encompassed before any one suspected that an army was near: and Elisha's servant, conceiving that the enmity of the king of Syria was chiefly directed against his master, was filled with despondency; taking for granted now that no possible method of escape for him remained. But Elisha knew that God was his protector, and therefore bade him dismiss his fears, assured that, whilst he had the Creator on his side, he need not feel the smallest anxiety, though the whole creation should be against him.

Now from this answer of Elisha we shall take occasion to shew you the excellency and efficacy of faith, in its discoveries, its consolations, its triumphs. Let us consider,

I. Its discoveries—

[The affrighted servant saw nothing but the invading army: but Elisha saw that there were invisible hosts of angels engaged in his defence: and he begged of God to open the servant's eyes, that he might have ocular demonstration of that fact, which he had beheld by faith.

Now this is the proper effect of faith^a: it discerns God as every where present to succour and support his people by his

^a Heb. xi. 27.

providence and grace. Faith beholds myriads of angels also waiting upon God, and flying at his command to execute his will, and to minister to his people. The chariots of fire and horses of fire were not more visible to the eye of sense, when God withdrew from the servant's face the veil that concealed them, than they were to Elisha by the eye of faith. If we could only conceive aright of Elisha's views at that moment, we should have a perfect idea of the proper office of faith, and of the high privilege which belongs to every believer———]

From the discoveries of faith we may judge of,

II. Its consolations—

[The servant was full of fear and terror; "Alas, my master! what shall we do?" But Elisha was as composed as if no enemy had been nigh. Thus it is that faith uniformly operates. However we be menaced by persecutors, it keeps us tranquil^b: however exposed we be to troubles of any kind, it preserves us in a peaceful state^c. How calm were Daniel and the Hebrew Youths, when menaced with the most cruel death! It assures us that though the waves and billows rise ever so high, there is at the helm a Pilot, who can guide our vessel in safety to the desired haven. The language of the heart on such occasions is, "If God be for me, who can be against me?" or, 'Who is he that shall harm me, if I be a follower of that which is good?']

They who in conflicts experience the consolations of faith, shall after their conflicts enjoy also,

III. Its triumphs—

[Whilst the servant was yielding to despair, the master was deriding the vain efforts of his enemies, and laughing them to scorn. In this light we must understand his address to them: it was not a solemn assertion, but a derisive banter; 'You are come hither to seek the prophet, but you are all under a mistake: come all of you with me; I will shew you the man whom you are seeking after:' and thus did he, alone and unarmed, lead captive, as it were, the armed hosts that came to apprehend him. Innumerable are the instances in holy writ where faith has triumphed in like manner, even before the conflict has been begun. How did Moses exult over the Egyptians^d; David over Goliath^e; Jehosaphat over three confederate armies^f; and Hezekiah over the proud Sennacherib^g!

^b Ps. iii. 6. and xxvii. 3. and 1 Pet. iii. 14, 15.

^c Isai. xxvi. 3.

^d Exod. xiv. 13, 14.

^e 1 Sam. xvii. 45—47.

^f 2 Chron. xx. 17, 20.

^g 2 Kings xix. 21.

and with what glorious confidence did Paul glory over all the enemies of his salvation^h! Thus it is our privilege also to “know in whom we have believed,” and to be assured that we shall be “more than conquerors through Him that loved usⁱ.”]

From this subject we may LEARN,

1. Our chief danger—

[The agency of spiritual beings is here confirmed beyond all doubt: and, if holy angels are active in our preservation, we may be well assured that evil angels are active in seeking our destruction. The truth is, that we are more in danger from the agency of evil spirits than from all other causes whatever; because of their malice, their subtlety, and their power. Were our eyes opened as those of Elisha’s servant were, we should see ourselves surrounded with myriads of those malignant foes, all acting in concert with each other under Beelzebub their head, and combining their efforts to destroy us. Let us remember how they are “working in all the children of disobedience,” and actually “leading the whole world captive at their will.” Let us particularly call to mind also the power which Satan exerted over Judas, Ananias, and even the Apostle Peter himself: and let us, under a sense of our insufficiency to withstand him, cry mightily to God, “to arm us for the combat, to strengthen us with might, and to bruise him under our feet^k.”]

2. Our great security—

[Of ourselves we have no sufficiency for the smallest thing: all our sufficiency is of God. Let us beg of God then to “hold us up, that we may be safe.” Let our eyes be directed to him in every danger, temporal and spiritual; and let us “commit the keeping of our souls to him in well-doing.” Then, how numerous soever our enemies may be, “we shall not be ashamed or confounded world without end.” He will not leave us in the hands of any enemy, but will “keep us by his power through faith unto everlasting salvation.”]

^h Rom. viii. 34—39.

ⁱ In confirmation of this, see Isai. viii. 12—14. and xxvi. 20.

^k Eph. vi. 10—18. Isai. xli. 10. Rom. xvi. 20.

CCCLXIX.

THE UNBELIEVING LORD PUNISHED.

2 Kings vii. 18—20. *And it came to pass as the man of God had spoken to the king, saying, Two measures of barley for a shekel, and a measure of fine flour for a shekel, shall be*

to-morrow, about this time, in the gate of Samaria: and that lord answered the man of God, and said, Now, behold, if the Lord should make windows in heaven, might such a thing be? And he said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof. And so it fell out unto him: for the people trode upon him in the gate, and he died.

THIS is a repetition of what had been said in the two first verses of this chapter; or rather it is a renewed recital of the prediction, as accomplished in all its parts. Now we are not to imagine that this repetition was without design. It was doubtless intended to call our attention to the history in a more peculiar manner, that we might observe it carefully throughout. In truth, it is a singularly instructive history, especially as discovering to us, what we propose distinctly to consider, the *folly* and *danger* of unbelief.

I. The folly of unbelief—

Faith appears to many to be a weak credulity; and unbelief a discreet estimate of causes and effects. Sceptics look with contempt upon Believers, even as this nobleman did upon the prophet, for expecting himself, and teaching others to expect, so incredible an event, as that which he foretold. But this history rebukes the folly of such conceited men. They imagine that they have sufficient reason for their unbelief: but this history shews us, that all those things which are supposed to justify unbelief, are, in fact, no grounds for it at all. There are three grounds in particular, which, as most commonly urged in its defence, it will be proper for us to consider:—

1. The extremity of our case—

[Many, both under temporal and spiritual distresses, will say, that there is no hope; and that to expect relief under such circumstances as theirs would be the height of presumption. But can any state be more desperate than that of Samaria at this time? The famine was so grievous, that things which would not have been deemed fit for food at other times, were made articles of subsistence; nor could they be procured but at a most exorbitant price. Yea, so extreme was the pressure of their hunger, that a woman, who had agreed with another to boil their children for their mutual support, came

to the king, to complain of the other woman for having hid her child, instead of giving it up according to their agreement, after having already fed upon the child of the complainant^a. Can any case be more extreme than this? We are almost ready to justify the nobleman who doubted the possibility of plenty being restored to the city in so short a time as twenty-four hours. But there are no circumstances under which God cannot interpose with effect^b. On the contrary, he is pleased frequently to let our troubles advance so as to appear irremediable, on purpose that his power may be the more magnified in our deliverance^c.]

2 Our great unworthiness—

[It is nothing but pride, under the semblance of humility, that leads any upright person to be discouraged by a sense of his unworthiness. If a man live in wilful and allowed sin, he doubtless can expect nothing at the hands of God: but, if he desire to be delivered from all sin, the deeper his sense is of his own unworthiness, the more readily will he find acceptance in the sight of God. The truth is, that God gives freely according to his own sovereign will and pleasure; and often makes his “grace to abound most where sin has most abounded.” To whom did he send the promise recorded in our text? To Jehoram, an idolatrous king of Israel. And under what circumstances did he send the promise? It was, when this wicked prince, instead of being humbled by his distresses, took occasion from them to rage still more against the God of Israel; and immediately after he had, with bitter imprecations, resolved to murder the Lord’s prophet that very day^d. Yes, to that very murderer, at the moment he was about to commit the murder, was that promise given! It is scarcely possible to conceive a state of greater unworthiness than his: yet, behold, to *him*, I say again, was the promise given. Who then that desires an interest in the Lord’s promises, has any reason to despond on account of his unworthiness?]

3. The want of any visible means of relief—

[The nobleman doubted whether the prediction could be verified, even if the Lord should open the windows of heaven, and rain down wheat and barley upon them, as he did manna in the wilderness. And as there was no hope of *such* an interposition, he concluded the prediction to be false. But what if *he* could see no way of relief: was *God* at any loss for means whereby to accomplish his own purposes? The Syrians shall

^a 2 Kings vi. 25—29. with Deut. xxviii. 56, 57. ^b Isai. lix. 1.

^c Deut. xxxii. 36.

^d 2 Kings vi. 31, 32.

be struck with a panic, and with perfect infatuation shall desert their camp and every thing in it. Still the purpose is but half effected: for, how shall the people in the city know the state of the Syrian camp? Four lepers perishing with hunger, shall go over to the Syrians, to cast themselves upon their mercy; and they shall find the whole camp forsaken, and report it in the besieged city: and thus shall perfect plenty be afforded them even in the space of a few hours. What then cannot God effect for us? Whether our distress be of a temporal or spiritual nature, he can in a moment “supply our wants,” and far “exceed all that we can ask, or even think.” “Is there any thing too hard for God?”]

If in this history we see the folly of unbelief, we behold no less,

II. The danger of it—

Unbelief is justly most offensive to God—

[Its very nature is to doubt the power or veracity of God. And is this a light offence? See how greatly he was offended at it in his people of old^e: and doubtless he will be still more offended at us on account of it, in proportion as his mercy and truth manifested to us in the gift of his dear Son, have exceeded all that he has ever shewn to mankind from the foundation of the world — — —]

In the history before us we see how certainly, and how awfully, it shall be punished—

[The moment that the nobleman had expressed his contempt of God’s promise, his doom was sealed, and his punishment declared. But the nobleman, being high in the confidence of his prince, was invested with authority to control and regulate the disposal of the spoil: consequently, if there were any one person in the city that was sure to enjoy the newly-acquired plenty, it was he. Yet, behold, the very means which seemed almost sure to defeat the divine purpose, were instrumental to its accomplishment: for the extreme eagerness of the people to obtain the food, occasioned him to be thrown down, and to be trodden to death under their feet. Yes; so had God threatened; and “*so it fell out unto him.*”]

Say then, ye who promise yourselves impunity in sin, whether “God’s word shall stand, or yours?” Shall it not “fall out unto you as God has said?” Yes, it shall: and “unbelievers shall assuredly take their portion at the last in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone^f.” See what became of

^e Ps. lxxviii. 40, 41.

^f Rev. xxi. 8.

those who doubted God's word in Paradise^g, or of the antediluvian infidels^h, or of the unbelieving Israelites in the wildernessⁱ! did not God's threatened vengeance fall on them? "Beware then, all of you, lest you also perish after the same example of unbelief^k." Whether God promise or threaten, it shall surely come to pass according to his word: "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself^l."

We may even notice some resemblance between the doom of that nobleman, and that which awaits the unbelieving world at large: "He saw the promised blessing, but he did not taste of it." And will it not be thus in that great and awful day when all shall stand at the judgment-seat of Christ? Those on the left hand of the Judge shall see the blessedness of his believing people, but shall not taste of it: on the contrary, whilst God's faithful people shall be admitted to a full enjoyment of their promised inheritance, the whole assembly of unbelievers shall be bidden to "depart accursed into everlasting burnings."]

APPLICATION—

[Consider now how you are affected by the word of God: does it come with weight and authority to your minds, as if you saw it about to be accomplished before your eyes? Is it a fixed principle with you, that "not one jot or tittle of that word can fail?" This is what God expects at our hands: he expects us to "tremble at his word^m," to entertain no doubt of its accomplishment, but to "be strong in faith, giving glory to God." On that he suspends his bestowment of further blessingsⁿ: and, for the most part, he will make *the strength of our faith* to be the *measure of his communications*^o.

Consider more particularly, how you are affected with all those "great and precious promises which he has given us" in Christ Jesus. Are you enabled to receive them "without staggering at them through unbelief?" This is your duty, this your privilege, this the pledge and earnest of all that God himself can bestow upon you.]

^g Gen. iii. 6, 16—19, 24. ^h 2 Pet. iii. 3—6.

ⁱ Heb. iii. 18, 19. See also especially Zech. i. 6.

^k Heb. iv. 11.

^l 2 Tim. ii. 13.

^m Isai. lxvi. 2.

ⁿ Jam. i. 6, 7.

^o Matt. viii. 13.

CCCLXX.

ELISHA PREDICTS THE ATROCIOUS ACTS OF HAZAEL.

2 Kings viii. 12. *And Hazael said, Why weepeth my lord? And he answered, Because I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel.*

TO reconcile Divine foreknowledge with the contingency of human events is a difficulty, which probably will never be solved in this present state of our existence. Yet, if it cannot be explained, it may be illustrated in some measure, and in such a way as to afford considerable satisfaction to the mind. In the history of which our text is a part, there is a circumstance which reflects some light upon it. Benhadad, king of Syria, was ill; and, hearing that Elisha was come into his county, he sent his servant Hazael, with very large and munificent presents, to inquire whether he should recover of his disease. The question being asked by Hazael, Elisha told him, that his master "might certainly recover;" but yet "should surely die^a." Here we see the termination of the disorder doubtful in one view, but certain in another: he *might* recover, because his constitution was strong enough to withstand the disorder; but he *should not* recover, because God foresaw that a measure would be resorted to, which would render the disorder fatal. Thus it is also with our spiritual maladies: they *may*, with the use of God's appointed remedies, be healed; but God knows infallibly whether we shall make use of those remedies, and, consequently, sees already what the event will be: in his eyes, it is as certain as if it had already taken place; but his view of it does not at all affect its contingency with respect to us.

Not intending to prosecute this subject any farther, we merely glance at it, as introductory to that on which the issue of the king's disorder turned. There was in the heart of Hazael a root of evil, which would induce him to destroy the king, in order to gain possession of his throne: and that root springing up, would bring forth such terrible fruits, as could not be contemplated without the most pungent sorrow. This the prophet saw, and deeply lamented; insomuch, that Hazael, astonished at the fixedness of the prophet's countenance, and at the tears which he shed, asked him with great

^a ver. 10.

emotion, "Why weepeth my lord?" The prophet told him, that he wept at the prospect of the horrible cruelties, which, however incapable of committing them he might now think himself, he would certainly ere long commit.

This is the point to which we would now call your attention: and it is well calculated to shew us,

I. How unconscious we are of our own depravity—

Hazael could not conceive it possible that the prophet's predictions respecting him should ever be fulfilled—

[Doubtless the predicted evils were very terrible^b: nor do we wonder that Hazael should ask so pointedly, "Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing^c?" But he was a stranger to his own heart, and ignorant of the effect which a change of circumstances may produce in our dispositions and conduct — — — The event soon verified all that the prophet had spoken concerning him: for, immediately on his return to his master, he gave a false report of the prophet's answer, and (probably under a pretence of using the best means for his recovery) adopted a measure, which he had reason to expect would speedily put a period to his existence. Having by these means succeeded to the throne, he soon waged war with Israel, and committed all those shocking cruelties, at the very mention of which he had once shrunk back with horror^d.]

Thus also do we question the representations which God gives respecting us—

[These are doubtless very humiliating, both in the Old Testament and the New^e — — — And we are ready to account them libels upon human nature. If we have been moral and sober hitherto, we have no conception that we could ever be induced to "run to the same excess of riot" as others have done. But may we not all find in ourselves the seeds of those iniquities, which in others have obtained their full growth? Have we not seen too, in many instances, that persons who

^b ver. 12.

^c This is supposed by some to mean, 'How can so insignificant a creature as I am, do such great things?' But the common interpretation seems the more natural, more especially as the situation he occupied under Benhadad rendered the performance of such things not so very impracticable, if he should ever be disposed to do them.

^d ver. 15. and 2 Kings xiii. 3, 7.

^e Jer. xvii. 9. Eccl. ix. 3. Gen. vi. 5. Rom. iii. 10—19. and viii. 7.

once thought themselves as superior to temptation as we now do, have sunk into the grossest habits of vice, and astonished the world with their iniquities? We can know but little of ourselves, if we have not learned to ascribe to God alone whatever difference there may be found between us and others^f.]

Let us learn then from the prophet,

II. What ought to be the frame of our minds in relation to it—

If we have not been left by God to perpetrate the more heinous crimes to which we have been tempted, still it will be proper for us to consider what our frame should be,

1. In reference to our depravity, so far as we have discovered it—

[Elisha wept at the contemplation of the future crimes of Hazael: and should not we *weep* at the evils of *our own* hearts, yea at the evils which we have actually committed? Verily, the best of us have done enough to humble us in the dust, and to make us weep with the deepest self-abasement. Let us look back and think of our past conduct towards God as our Sovereign, towards Jesus as our Redeemer, and towards the Holy Spirit, who has been striving with us all our days — — — Is here no cause for tears? If Prophets and Apostles wept so bitterly for others who kept not God's law, should not we for ourselves^g? Yes, the best of us, as well as the worst, needs to "go on his way weeping," and can only hope to "reap in joy," when he shall have humbly "sown in tears" — — —]

2. In reference to that which is yet hid from our eyes—

[Much, very much, there is in us, which we have never yet seen: either we have never been brought into situations to call it forth, or God has mercifully withheld us from perpetrating all that was in our hearts. But our hearts are altogether corrupt; and therefore we should *tremble*, yea and "work out our salvation with fear and trembling," even to our latest hour: "we should not be high-minded, but fear;" "watching continually and praying, that we may not enter into temptation." The confidence of Peter, as well as that of Hazael, may be a lesson to us. To God then must we look to "keep us by his power," even to Him who alone "can keep us from falling, and present us faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy."]

^f 1 Cor. iv. 7.

^g Ps. cxix. 136. Jer. xiii. 17. Rom. ix. 1—3. Phil. iii. 18.

That we may yet further IMPROVE this subject, let us learn,

1. To be thankful for God's grace—

[What is the reason that we have not been as vile as the most abandoned of mankind? Are we made of any better materials than they? or have we in ourselves any more strength than they? No: we owe it entirely to the distinguishing grace of God. It is He who has "hedged up our way," and even in many instances "built a wall against us," that we might not fall into those temptations which would have utterly overwhelmed us: "He kept us, though we knew him not;" and "by his grace alone we are what we are." O let us adore and magnify him for all his goodness towards us; and when we see others wallowing in iniquity, remember who alone has made us to differ from them!]

2. To be submissive to his providence—

[It may be that God has been pleased to disappoint us in some things which we have set our heart upon; and we have been grieved and vexed at the dispensation. But how little do we know what would have been the effect of success! Perhaps the attainment of our wishes would have operated as Hazael's advancement did on him, and we should have long before this time have been even monsters in iniquity. At all events we have reason to believe that what we have lost was only like thick clay, which would have impeded us greatly in our Christian course. Perhaps God has seen fit to lay upon us some heavy affliction. Are we sure it was not necessary to lead us to deeper views of our own corruption, and to a more entire dependence on the Lord Jesus? We may be sure at least that our afflictions have been sent, as the pruning-knife, to lop off our luxuriant branches, and to make us more fruitful in the fruits of righteousness to God's praise and glory.]

3. To pant after his glory—

[It is in heaven alone that we shall be free from sin. Whilst we are in the body, we are exposed to the assaults of that roaring lion, that seeketh to devour us. True it is, we have God's promises to trust unto; but true it is also that we have wicked and deceitful hearts; and if we had attained as much as ever the Apostle Paul did, we must still, like him, "keep under our body, and bring it into subjection, lest by any means, after having preached to others, we should be cast away ourselves." Let us then "look for, and haste unto, the coming of the day of Christ," even that blessed day, when all sin shall be purged from our hearts, and "all tears be wiped from our eyes."]

CCCLXXI.

THE DESTRUCTION OF AHAB'S FAMILY BY JEHU.

2 Kings ix. 36. *And he said, This is the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, In the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel.*

FROM nothing does the unbeliever receive more solid grounds of conviction, than from the facts recorded in the sacred history. In those facts there is undeniable evidence, that there is a God, who “ordereth all things after the counsel of his own will,” and who is particularly “known by the judgments which he executeth.” In confirmation of this truth we will shew,

I. How God's word was accomplished in the history before us—

[We lay no stress on the fulfilment of what was spoken to Jehu, because the declaration made to him was the immediate *cause* of his adopting measures for the attainment of the sovereign power. But the accomplishment of God's word in the death of Jehoram and of Jezebel was independent of any human purposes whatever. The fate that awaited Ahab and Jezebel had long before been announced by the Prophet Elijah; though on account of Ahab's repentance, the evil denounced against him, had been deferred, and the fulfilment of the threatening had been reserved for his children. Now it was particularly specified by Elijah to Ahab, that “where dogs had licked the blood of Naboth, they should lick his blood:” and that “dogs should eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel^a.” Behold then how exactly these prophecies were accomplished! Jehoram was at Jezreel: but how came he there? he had gone thither to be healed of the wounds which the Syrians had given him. But why did he not flee from thence, when he saw that Jehu detained the messengers that were sent to ascertain the reason of his approach? He was altogether infatuated; for instead of fleeing, both “he and Ahaziah king of Judah went out, each in his chariot, to meet Jehu,” and they actually “met him in the portion of Naboth the Jezreelite^b,” where Jehu drew his bow against Jehoram, and smote him through the heart. And so remarkable was this accomplishment of the prophet's prediction, that Jehu himself was struck with astonishment at it, and ordered that the corpse should be there exposed to

^a 1 Kings xxi. 19, 23.

^b ver. 21.

public view, in order that the justice of God, in so requiring the injury done to Naboth, might be manifest to all^c. The same infatuation seized Jezebel also; for she, when she knew that her son Jehoram was dead, instead of fleeing, or consulting her own safety by submission, insulted Jehu, and was, by his order, thrown out of the window by her own servants, in the very place where God had foretold that death should come upon her. Jehu after some hours bethought him, that as Jezebel, though an accursed woman, was a king's daughter, it was not right to leave her dead body exposed in the streets; and therefore he gave orders that she should be taken up and buried; but, behold, when they came to look for her, nothing of her remained but her scull and her feet, and the palms of her hands; for the dogs had devoured her: and this singular accomplishment of God's word respecting her, brought again to Jehu's recollection the prediction of Elijah, so minutely verified, not only without any design on his part, but even contrary to his design^d.

An attentive survey of such facts as these is of the greatest use: it convinces us that every word of God must be fulfilled in its season, and that "sooner shall heaven and earth pass away, than one jot or tittle of it should fail."]

From beholding the word of God thus verified in them, let us proceed to notice,

II. How it shall be accomplished sooner or later in the history of us all—

As our subject leads us almost exclusively to speak of those who are obnoxious to the Divine threatenings, we shall comprehend them under two classes;

1. Those who make no profession of religion—

[These may differ widely from each other with respect to their external conduct; but in the habit of their minds as alienated from God, and averse to heavenly pursuits, they are all alike; unregenerate, unsanctified, unhumbled. They fear not God: "he is not in all their thoughts:" "they proceed from evil to evil, because they know not God" — — — We again say, that they do not all commit *the same* iniquities; but they all live as without God in the world — — — And is not this agreeable to what St. Paul has spoken of the natural man^e? — — — Yes verily, his word is fulfilled in every child of Adam. Thus it is with them *in this world*.

Next, let us see how it is with them *in the eternal world*.

^c ver. 26. ^d ver. 36, 37. ^e Rom. iii. 10—18. and viii. 7.

They go, each at his appointed time, into the presence of their God: but in him they find an angry and an avenging Judge: and from his presence are they driven to reap the just reward of their deeds. They would not, whilst living, regard his threatenings; and therefore they are left to experience the accomplishment of them to all eternity. And is not this precisely according to what the Psalmist has forewarned them of^f? Has not St. Paul also again and again guarded them against deluding themselves with vain expectations of a different end^g? — — — Yes; in all of them will there be scope for precisely the same observation as Jehu made respecting Joram, and Jezebel; “This is the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servants the prophets.”]

2. Those who walk unworthy of their profession—

[Mark the different persons who decline from the ways of God: there is the same variety found amongst them as amongst the carnal and ungodly world: each has his separate pursuit, and each his separate infirmity: but in this all agree; that, whatever be their besetting sin, they are led captive by it more and more; the earthly, the sensual, the devilish, become more and more enslaved by their respective lusts and passions, from the time that they depart from God — — — And what is this but an accomplishment of that word of Solomon, “The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways^h?”]

Follow them also into the eternal world; and there also you will find that verified, “It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to themⁱ.” They “have been heaping up treasures indeed for the last days;” but they are found to be treasures of wrath, agreeably to that declaration of Elihu, “The hypocrites in heart heap up wrath^k.” The separation predicted by our Lord takes place; nor do the privileges they enjoyed in this world, or the wonders they performed, avail any thing for the altering of the sentence passed against them^l.]

OBSERVE NOW from hence,

1. The folly of neglecting the Holy Scriptures—

[These contain the whole revealed will of God; and according to these we shall be judged in the last day. What folly is it then not to study them, and to find out beforehand what shall then assuredly come to pass! O let us search them; let us bear in mind whose word is there contained; and let us not rest one single hour in a state that is there condemned.]

^f Ps. ix. 17.

^g 1 Cor. vi. 9. Gal. vi. 7, 8.

^h Prov. xiv. 14.

ⁱ 2 Pet. ii. 21.

^k Job xxxvi. 13.

^l Matt. vii. 21—23.

2. The evil and danger of unbelief—

[Unbelief “puffs at the word of God,” as though it never should come to pass. But can we point out any one declaration of God that has failed of accomplishment? As St. Paul says in reference to the Jews, so may we in reference to the whole world; “What if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God of none effect^m?” Did not God’s word “take hold of them” at the different periods of their historyⁿ? Yes, and in us also shall they be fulfilled in their season; nor shall one iota of them ever fall to the ground. The infidels shall “know ere long, whose word shall stand, whether God’s or theirs^o.”]

3. The truth and faithfulness of all the promises—

[If the threatenings of God are sure, so also are the promises; nor shall any one of them fail the person who trusts in them. Let us remember, that “in Christ Jesus they are all yea and Amen.” Let us lay hold on Christ, and all the promises are ours: we may plead them at the throne of grace; we may rely upon them; we may expect the accomplishment of them; and in that great day, when all the ungodly shall be banished from the presence of their God, we shall have them fulfilled to us in their utmost extent, being put into complete possession of our promised inheritance.]

^m Rom. v. 3.ⁿ Compare Zech. i. 6. with Dan. ix. 11—13.^o Jer. xlv. 28.

CCCLXXII.

TRUE AND FALSE ZEAL.

2 Kings x. 16. *Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord.*

UNGODLY men, though they will not follow the example of the godly, are glad to have their sanction and approbation in what they do. Jehu was indeed acting at this time under a divine commission. The work in which he was engaged, was that of extirpating the whole house and family of Ahab: and, terrible as it was, he did right to execute it, because he acted under a divine command^a. But his spirit in executing the work was far from right. He was too much under the influence of pride and ambition.

^a 2 Kings ix. 7—9.

This appears from his address to Jehonadab, in the words before us. Jehonadab was a holy man, and had considerable influence in the state: and, knowing that Jehu was fulfilling the will of heaven, he went to meet him, and to testify his approbation of his proceedings. And Jehu, glad to have the sanction of such a man, took him up into his chariot, saying, "Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord.

Now, as this zeal was partly good, and partly evil, I propose to shew,

I. When our zeal is such as will bear inspection—

"It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing^b." And we may be assured that our zeal is good,

1. When it proceeds from a principle of love—

[Love is properly the principle from which all our actions should flow. There are, indeed, far different principles from which our zeal may spring. We may be led on by a spirit of party, which will operate to the production of great efforts in the support of any cause. Or we may be actuated by a natural forwardness of disposition, which urges men to prosecute with ardour whatever they undertake. A self-righteous hope of commending themselves to God, also, will stimulate some to incredible exertions in any cause in which they are embarked. But that which alone gives the stamp of piety to our services, is love. We should act from a sense of the unbounded obligations which we owe to God, both as our Creator and Redeemer. "Our souls should be altogether constrained by the love of Christ, to live to him^c:" and so far as we are actuated by that principle, we have reason to hope and to believe that our zeal is genuine, and that our services are pleasing and acceptable to God.]

2. When it is regulated by the written word—

[As our zeal may spring from an unworthy motive, so it may be exercised in an unhallowed way. It must be bounded by the occasion that calls it forth; neither exceeding it, nor falling short of it. Joshua erred in making a league with the Gibeonites, whom he was commissioned to destroy^d: but Saul also erred, when, "from his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah, he sought to slay them^e." There is an intemperate

^b Gal. iv. 18.

^d Josh. xi. 18—20.

^c 2 Cor. v. 14, 15.

^e 2 Sam. xxi. 1—6.

most important duty : but to engage in that service uncalled, and unsent, is not by any means expedient or right : for even our blessed Lord “glorified not himself to be made an high priest, but waited for the call” of his heavenly Fatherⁿ. So again, we must attend to the *time* and *manner* of executing what we conceive to be a lawful act ; and not abuse our liberty by exercising it in a way that may prove offensive to others^o. In a word, our zeal must be wisely regulated: it should be able to rise to any occasion that may call for it^p; but it should be under due control ; nor should it ever be satisfied with a conviction that a thing is “lawful,” without considering also whether, and how far, it is “expedient^q.”

We think, then, that a zeal flowing from such a source, and regulated by such a standard, and exercised in such a way, will bear inspection ; and that, so far as we give the invitation for the purpose of self-inquiry, and not of self-applause, we may say, not to man only, but even to God himself, “Come, and see my zeal for the Lord.”]

But there are occasions when our zeal is blameworthy, and,

II. When it evidently manifests itself to be delusive and vain—

It is altogether vain and unacceptable to God,

1. When it is ostentatious—

[Such was that of Jehu on this occasion. Raised to kingly power, and successful beyond his most sanguine expectations, he was elated with pride, and desirous of having his prowess admired and extolled. Hence his conduct, which, as conformable to a divine command, was made the ground of a reward, was, on account of the base mixture of pride and cruelty with which it was pursued, visited with signal punishment^r. Ostentation will mar and vitiate the best actions that we can possibly perform. The giving of alms, or the waiting upon God with fasting and prayer, are acceptable services, if performed aright ; but when made occasions for advancing ourselves in the estimation of men, they are hateful and contemptible in the sight of God, and will bring with them no other recompence than that which we vainly seek^s.” The declaration of God in relation to such things is plain and express : “For a man to seek his own glory, is not glory^t :” therefore “let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth ; a stranger, and not thine own lips^u.”

ⁿ Heb. v. 4—6.

^o 1 Cor. viii. 10—13.

^p Acts xxi. 13.

^q 1 Cor. vi. 12.

^r Compare ver. 20. with Hos. i. 4.

^s Matt. vi. 1—5.

^t Prov. xxv. 27.

^u Prov. xxvii. 2.

To this, then, we must carefully attend: for if, whilst professing to serve the Lord, we “sacrifice to our own net, and burn incense to our own drag^x,” be the service what it may, God will say, “Who hath required this at your hands^y?” yea, it will be no better, in his sight, than “the cutting off a dog’s neck, or the offering of swine’s blood^z.”]

2. When it is partial—

[In this respect, also, Jehu’s zeal notoriously failed. He was sent to punish Ahab’s wickedness; and yet himself joined in the idolatry which he was ordered to abolish^a, and indulged in all the sins which he was commissioned to correct^b. Zeal, if pure, will extend to every part of our duty: it has respect to God’s will; and therefore will operate in reference to all his commands; to those which require self-denial, no less than to those which may administer to our personal gratification. Zeal will be in the soul what the soul is in the body: its operation will be uniform and abiding—— Whether our actions be public or private, and whether our duties be of an active or passive kind, it will stimulate us to approve ourselves to the heart-searching God: and, if it fail of this, at least in our endeavours, it is evidently not such as has God for its author, nor such as God will ultimately approve.]

3. When it is transient—

[The stony-ground hearers manifest a great degree of zeal for a season: “they anon with joy receive the word; but, having no root in themselves, they believe only for a while, and in time of temptation fall away^c.” But it is not sufficient for any man to “run well for a season only^d.” “We must endure unto the end, if ever we would be saved^e.” We are “not to look back, after having once put our hand to the plough^f.” “We are never to be weary in well-doing:” “never, under any circumstances, to faint.” On this our future remuneration altogether depends^g. “The man who draws back, draws back unto perdition^h,” and he whose zeal will not carry him to the last extremity, even to the enduring of the most cruel death, will fail of obtaining the approbation of his Godⁱ. I must, therefore, guard you against ever relaxing in your zeal even for a moment. Whatever your attainments be, and whatever you may have done or suffered in the service of your God, you must “forget the things that are behind, and reach forward unto that which is before, and press on for the prize

^x Hab. i. 16.

^a ver. 29.

^d Gal. v. 6.

^g Gal. vi. 9.

^y Isai. i. 11, 12.

^b ver. 31.

^e Matt. x. 22.

^h Heb. x. 38, 39.

^z Isai. lxvi. 3.

^c Luke viii. 13.

^f Luke ix. 62.

ⁱ Luke xvii. 33.

of your high calling," till you have actually finished your course, and obtained the crown which is to be awarded to you^k.]

In conclusion, let me say to every individual amongst you—

1. Have a zeal for God—

[God is not to be served with lukewarmness¹ — — — He requires the heart, the whole heart^m: and surely he is worthy of it; and his service well deserves it. See what zeal men display in the pursuits of this world; the student, for knowledge; the merchant, for his gains; the soldier, for honour: and will you be behind any one of them? Does our blessed Lord and Saviour deserve less at your hands, than this vain and perishing world can do? The burnt-offerings, you know, were wholly consumed upon God's altar: they were wholly God's; and the priests had no part in them. Such offerings are ye to be: and to be devoted thus exclusively to God is "your reasonable serviceⁿ." Give yourselves up, then, entirely to God; and "whatsoever your hand findeth to do, do it with all your might^o."]

2. Let "your zeal be according to knowledge"—

[Ignorant zeal will only deceive and ruin you, as it did the Pharisees of old^p. There is a great deal of zeal in the world: else whence come the penances and pilgrimages of the Papists? and whence the accursed cruelties of the Inquisition? Who knows not the persecutions that Christianity has sustained from heathens; or the miseries that Popery, under the name of Christianity, has inflicted on those who would not yield to its abominations? In all these things, the agents "have imagined that they did to God an acceptable service^q." Nor can I deny that even good men have sometimes been betrayed into a very erroneous line of conduct, from a mistaken notion, that they were serving God, whilst anathematizing those who differed from them in some matters of subordinate importance. But be not satisfied, brethren, even though Jehonadab himself be embarked in the same cause with you. It is not by man's judgment or example that you are to stand or fall, but by the judgment of your God, according to his written word. Endeavour, then, to have your mind and spirit regulated by the only standard of right and wrong. And especially be on your guard against a fiery zeal. "The zeal of our

^k Phil. iii. 13, 14.

¹ Rev. iii. 15, 16.

^m Prov. xxiii. 26. Hos. x. 2.

ⁿ Rom. xii. 1. ^o Eccl. ix. 10.

^p Rom. x. 2, 3.

^q John xvi. 2.

blessed Lord was such as even consumed him^r:" but remember, it was *himself* that it consumed, not *others*: yea, when he himself suffered from the blind zeal of others, he prayed for them, even for his very murderers^s. "Be ye then followers of him." "Let it be your meat and your drink to do the will of God yourselves^t:" but, with respect to others, let all your efforts be "to save, and not to destroy them^u;" to "win them" by love^x, and not constrain them by force^y.]

^r John ii. 17.

^s Luke xxiii. 34.

^t John iv. 34.

^u Luke ix. 56.

^x Prov. xi. 30.

^y Luke xiv. 23.

CCCLXXIII.

THE CHARACTER OF JEHU.

2 Kings x. 30, 31. *And the Lord said unto Jehu, Because thou hast done well in executing that which is right in mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in mine heart, thy children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel. But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart: for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin.*

WE can scarcely conceive any stronger proof of God's willingness to reward his people, than that which he has given us in rewarding persons, whose services were merely external, without any real love to him in their hearts. If we were to judge from the honour put upon Jehu, we should be ready to suppose he was, if not a blameless, yet, on the whole, a pious character: but on a review of his history, our admiration must be fixed, not on him, but on that infinitely gracious and condescending Being, who was pleased to remunerate such services as his. Let us consider,

I. The character of Jehu—

Here was a mixture, not uncommon in the world. Let us notice,

1. What he did for God—

[Being appointed of God to the office of avenging upon Ahab the blood of Naboth and of the prophets, he addressed

himself to the work without delay. In the space of a few hours he destroyed Jehoram, with his mother Jezebel, and then instantly set himself to complete the work he had so prosperously begun. And it is worthy of observation, that in extirpating the family of Ahab, he succeeded by the very same means which Jezebel had used for the destruction of Naboth. He sent letters to the great men of Samaria, to whose care the seventy sons of Ahab were entrusted, and required of them to cut off their heads in one single night, and send them to him at Jezreel: and these elders, many of whom had doubtless concurred in the shedding of Naboth's blood at the command of Jezebel, now, at the command of Jehu, became traitors to their king, and murderers of all his family.

But, besides cutting off the posterity of Ahab, he proceeded also to execute judgment on all the worshippers of Baal. By a stratagem deeply laid, but ill according with truth or godliness, he succeeded against these also in one day; and entirely banished, as it were, the worship of Baal from the land, burning all his images with fire, and making his very temple a draught-house, or sink of all uncleanness.

In this conduct he gained the approbation of Jehonadab, whose pious character and zealous co-operation strengthened and encouraged him in this arduous undertaking. From God himself too did he obtain a decided testimony of approbation, together with a rich reward: for he alone of all the kings of Israel had the kingdom continued to his posterity of the fourth generation, or for so long a period of years.

Thus, it must be confessed, he appears to have been a distinguished servant of the Lord; though, alas! he was but partial in that obedience which he rendered.]

2. What he omitted to do—

[Against Ahab, whom it was his interest to destroy, and Baal, whom he had no wish to preserve, he executed vengeance with zeal; but against the calves of Dan and Bethel, which policy required him to preserve — — —, he raised not up his hand. Nor indeed did he make the law of God the rule of his conduct: "he took no heed to walk according to that;" much less did he aim at it "with all his heart:" no; he both indulged in himself, and tolerated in others, much that was contrary to the divine will; and thus he manifested, that, notwithstanding all his outward obedience, his heart was not right in the sight of God.]

Such was his character, externally good, but internally depraved. Let us proceed to notice,

II. The lessons to be deduced from it—

Such characters as these are very instructive: they teach us,

1. That we may perform many outward duties, and yet have no vital principle of religion within us—

[The actions of Jehu, as to *the matter* of them, were good; and therefore they were rewarded; but in *their motive and principle* they were bad; and therefore God afterwards visited them with a severe punishment^a. This shews, that notwithstanding all he did for the Lord, he had not within him any principle of true piety. And thus it is with multitudes amongst ourselves: they are zealous against open vice and profaneness, yea active too in many works of benevolence, and yet appear evidently to be destitute of vital godliness: they have never been truly humbled before God, never fled to Christ for refuge, never given themselves up to God as his redeemed people — — — How much is it to be regretted that such persons, who by their virtues have gained the admiration and love of the most pious characters, and even received a recompence from the Lord also, should yet, for want of a root of grace in them, never bring forth fruit unto perfection, and never obtain happiness in the eternal world! Like the youth in the Gospel, or Nicodemus, or Paul in his unconverted state, they are zealous towards God to a certain extent, but without a new and spiritual birth must for ever perish. O that all who have a zeal for God in the performance of outward duties, would carefully examine the principles by which they are actuated, and never be satisfied with any action which has not a sense of redeeming love for its moving cause!]

2. That we may profess much zeal for God, and yet have a radical alienation of heart from him—

[Jehu certainly professed to be actuated by a regard for God's honour: "Come, see my zeal for the Lord," said he: and when the different events had taken place, he made reflections upon them as accomplishing the divine predictions. Yet his flagrant neglect of other duties stamped him an hypocrite in the sight of God. And is it not thus with many who make a profession of religion in the present day? They think themselves zealous for God, and wish to be thought so by others: but they are manifestly under the dominion of some reigning lusts, some evil tempers, some hidden abominations. They will sacrifice the refuse to the Lord, and such things as they care but little about; but the choicest of the flocks, and the sins which are more intimately connected with their pleasures or their interests, they will retain. Let professors of religion

^a Hos. i. 4.

who are so ardent in talking about their favourite topics, or in attending on the ordinances of religion, inquire, Whether the law of God be really in their hearts; whether they are aspiring after an entire conformity to its commands; and whether they are longing to “stand perfect and complete in all the will of God?” Sad will it be to be numbered among those of whom St. James speaks, who seem to be religious, and yet, by their unbridled tongues, and unsubdued tempers, shew that they “deceive their own selves, and that their religion is vain^b.”]

3. That if ever we would be accepted of God hereafter, we must have our hearts right with him now—

[This is required of every human being^c. Absolute perfection indeed is not to be expected; but Christian perfection must be attained; nor without it will any conformity to outward rights, or any profession of Christian principles, avail us before God^d——— But how shall this state of mind be attained? It must be sought by prayer to God, who has promised to give us his Holy Spirit, and by the mighty working of that Spirit to bring us to an entire conformity to his will^e. Plead then with God that blessed promise: yea, give him no rest till he accomplish it to your souls. Then shall your heart be made right with God, as God’s is with you; and with infinite condescension will he “take you up to sit with him in the chariot” of his love, and on the throne of his glory^f.]

^b Jam. i. 26.

^c Deut. x. 12, 13. and xviii. 13.

^d Acts viii. 21.

^e Ezek. xxxvi. 26, 27.

^f ver. 15.

CCCLXXIV.

ELISHA’S REPROOF TO JOASH.

2 Kings xiii. 18, 19. *And he said, Take the arrows. And he took them. And he said unto the king of Israel, Smite upon the ground. And he smote thrice, and stayed. And the man of God was wroth with him, and said, Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten Syria till thou hadst consumed it; whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice.*

IN this passage is recorded a conversation between King Joash and the Prophet Elisha. The prophet was dying; and the king, who had utterly neglected him before, now went to visit him, and

was full of concern about the loss, which both he and all his people would sustain: the king even wept over him, and most pathetically exclaimed, "O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!"— — — Thus it is that the servants of the Lord are too generally treated: they are neglected and despised in their life; but, when they are no longer able to benefit the world, their loss is deeply felt.

On this occasion God put fresh honour upon his servant, and made him a messenger of glad tidings to the king. These tidings were conveyed under two symbolical representations; the shooting of an arrow towards Syria, and the smiting of a bundle of arrows upon the ground. But it seems that the king, though apprised of God's gracious intentions towards him, was not by any means either so enlarged in his expectations, or so ardent in his desires, as he should have been: he was lukewarm; and by his lukewarmness he both displeased the prophet, and deprived himself of a great measure of that mercy which God had designed to bestow upon him.

Now this subject affords us a fit occasion to consider,

I. What messages of mercy God has sent to us—

Innumerable are the intimations which God has given us of a glorious deliverance from all our spiritual enemies: they have been given,

1. By significant emblems—

[What was the preservation of Noah and his family in the ark, but a representation to us of that deliverance which shall be vouchsafed to all who are found in Christ? All the rest of

^a This is the same expression as Elisha himself had used in reference to Elijah, 2 Kings ii. 12. The people of Israel were forbidden to multiply chariots and horses, that they might look to God alone as their strength. And they were now so reduced by Hazael king of Syria, that they had only ten chariots and fifty horsemen left; ver. 7. But if they had attended to Elisha, they would not have needed any such protectors, because God himself would have defended them. This truth the king now acknowledged, feeling that he was about to lose the best support of his kingdom.

the world shall perish; but they shall be “*saved in the Lord* with an everlasting salvation^b.” What were the deliverances of God’s people from Egypt and Babylon, but typical exhibitions of that redemption which God has vouchsafed to us in Christ Jesus? In this light they are uniformly set forth in the holy Scriptures; and from them we learn never to despair^c — — — What were all the miracles of our Lord, but so many emblems of the spiritual blessings which shall be imparted unto us by the Gospel^d — — — Above all, what was the resurrection of our blessed Lord, but a pledge, yea, a shadowy representation also, of that restoration to a new and spiritual life, of which all shall partake who believe in Christ^e? — — —]

2. By express promises—

[Where shall we begin, or where shall we end, our enumeration of the “*exceeding great and precious promises*” which are given us in the Gospel? Though we should confine ourselves to the precise idea of the text, and contemplate the promises solely as relating to our deliverance from spiritual enemies, we might easily collect passages almost without number^f — — — These are made, like that in our text, even to the most unworthy of mankind.]

3. By the declarations and examples of dying saints—

[Behold Jacob on his dying bed^g; or the aged Simeon with Jesus in his arms^h: see St. Paul, in daily expectation of martyrdom; how bright his prospects, how heavenly his frameⁱ! In such passages as these we see death entirely disarmed of its sting, and the triumphs of heaven, as it were, begun. But we need not go back to the days of old: we may hear for ourselves precisely similar declarations, if we will frequent the chambers of sick and dying saints. In all such instances, the departing saints bring the matter home to our own feelings, and “*put, as it were, their hands upon ours,*” to teach us how to shoot, and to encourage our efforts^k: and God himself instructs us, what *we* also may expect from him in a dying hour — — —]

Amidst so many gracious intimations from God, we should inquire,

II. Whence it is that we profit so little by them?

^b 1 Pet. iii. 20, 21.

^c Isai. xl. 4, 5.

^d Isai. xxxv. 5, 6. John ix. 39.

^e Compare Eph. i. 19—22. with Eph. ii. 4—7.

^f *Sin*, Rom. vi. 14. *Satan*, Rom. xvi. 20. *Death*, 1 Cor. iii. 22. *Hell*, John iii. 15, 16. or all in one, Luke iv. 18.

^g Gen. xlix. 18.

^h Luke ii. 29.

ⁱ 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.

^k See ver. 16.

The fault is in ourselves alone, just as it was in the king of Israel—

1. Our desires are faint—

[We do not long for the blessings of redemption as we ought to do: we should “pant after them, as the hart after the water-brooks¹.” But instead of this, we are satisfied with low attainments: and, if we can, as it were, just get within the door of mercy, we have no ambition either to glorify God on earth, or to obtain an augmented weight of glory in heaven. The people of this world put us utterly to shame: *they* are never satisfied: the more they obtain, the more their desires are enlarged. O that it were thus with us; and that we were determined “never to be satisfied, till we awake up after the perfect image of our God^m!”]

2. Our expectations low—

[We do not actually deny the truth of God in his promises; but we do not view them in their breadth and length, and depth and height. God says to us, “Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it:” but we have no enlargement in prayer. “We are not straitened in him; but we are straitened in our own bowels.” God tells us, that “according to our faith it shall be unto us:” but we, instead of raising our expectations in proportion to the ability of the Giver, are ever limiting his power and grace; and on every occasion we ask, *Can* he do this thing? or *Will* he do it for me? This is a fault even amongst eminent saints. It was for this that Jesus reproved the sisters of Lazarus: he had told them, that their brother should rise again: and, when he went to the grave to raise him, they thought that the circumstance of his having been dead four days was an insurmountable obstacle to his restoration to life: but Jesus replied, “Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?” This reproof most justly belongs to us. If when we attended the ordinances of religion, or read the word of God, or opened our mouths in prayer, we really expected such manifestations of God’s power and love as he has given us reason to expect, what might we not obtain at his hands? But God does not perform, and, if we may so speak, cannot perform, all that he would for us, because of our unbeliefⁿ.]

3. Our exertions languid—

[When we come into the divine presence, the arrows are, as it were, put into our hands; but we are content with

¹ Ps. xlii. 1, 2. and lxiii. 1, 2. and lxxxiv. 2. ^m Ps. xvii. 15.

ⁿ Matt. xiii. 58. with Mark vi. 5.

striking twice or thrice. We do not “stir up ourselves to lay hold on God:” we do not wrestle with him, and determine not to let him go, until he has bestowed a blessing on our souls. We should “give him no rest,” till he has manifested to us the acceptance of our prayers. But we perform all our duties in so cold a way as rather to offend God by our lukewarmness, than to please him by our zeal. The prophet was justly displeased with Joash for not shewing greater ardour in the cause of Israel: “Thou shouldest have smitten,” says he, “five or six times: then hadst thou smitten Syria, till thou hadst consumed it: whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice.” This prediction was exactly verified: “Joash did beat them only three times^o:” and thus we find it in our own experience: we gain some victories, it is true; but they are only small and partial, because we war not with all our might — — —]

ADVICE—

1. Improve the opportunities which God affords you by his ministers—

[Elisha ministered for above sixty years: yet Joash never availed himself of his instructions, till they were about to be for ever withdrawn. And is it not so wherever the faithful servants of God are sent? The generality, especially of the great and opulent, disregard their warnings, and despise their messages of mercy. O that it might not be found so in this place! If God has sent you the light, learn to walk in the light, whilst you have it; lest darkness come upon you, and “the word which ought to be a savour of life, become unto you a savour of death.”]

2. Trifle not with the impressions which are at any time upon your minds—

[Joash appeared to be now in a hopeful way; but he soon lost his good impressions, and died, as he had lived, an enemy of God. And are there not found amongst us many, whose “goodness is as the morning cloud, and as the early dew that passeth away?” Under the ordinances perhaps, or in a time of sickness, or *under the prospect of some painful bereavement*, you have been affected, and been made willing to obey the voice of God’s prophets: but you have soon forgotten all your vows, and “returned with the dog to his vomit, and with the sow that is washed to her wallowing in the mire.” Truly should this be the case with you, “your latter end will be worse than your beginning: for it were better never to have known the way of righteousness, than after having known it to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto you.”]

CCCLXXV.

THE BIBLE STANDARD OF RELIGION.

2 Kings xvii. 33. *They feared the Lord, and served their own gods.*

THE views which men in general have of religion are extremely indistinct. Hence arises the necessity of unfolding religion to them in every possible way. Sometimes we attempt it by a clear exposition of its principles from the declarations of the Inspired Volume. Sometimes we bring forth the examples of the Apostles, and shew what their views of religion were. On the present occasion, I will proceed in a way of contrast, that so the difference between true religion and false may the more fully appear.

The persons of whom my text speaks were the inhabitants of Samaria. When the king of Assyria had subdued the ten tribes of Israel, he took away the inhabitants, and dispersed them throughout his own dominions, and sent a number of his own subjects to occupy and cultivate the land. These persons, coming from different parts of the Assyrian Empire, took with them their own gods, whom they had severally been wont to worship. But, after a season, the lions of the forests multiplied, and caused such destruction among them, that they could not but regard it as a token of God's displeasure, for not being worshipped and served in a way conformable to his own appointed ordinances. The people stated this to the king of Assyria; and requested that one of the priests who had been taken from the land, should be sent back, in order to instruct them how Jehovah, whom they supposed to be a *local* Deity, and the god of that particular land, was to be worshipped. This request was complied with: a priest was sent to them: a number of others were appointed to officiate with him under his direction: and thus the people united the worship of Jehovah with that of their own idols; or, as my text expresses it, "feared the Lord,

and served their own gods^a." And in this state they continued even to the time of our blessed Lord; who said to the Samaritan woman, "Ye worship ye know not what^b." Now, this will afford me an opportunity of shewing what true religion is; by contrasting,

I. The Samaritan standard of religion—

From the history of the Samaritans, as contained in the chapter before us, it will be seen what their religion was—

[It had *self-complacency for its object, form for its essence, and custom for its origin.*

It had *self-complacency for its object*: for every one worshipped his own gods; as it is said: "Every nation made gods of their own, and put them in the houses of the high-places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in their cities where they dwelt^c." If they added Jehovah to them, it was from fear of his vengeance: "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods;" fearing *him* by *constraint*, and serving *them* by *choice*. They had a general idea that it was well to acknowledge *some* god: and with that they were satisfied.

It had *form for its essence*: "They made unto themselves, of the lowest of the people, priests of the high-places, which sacrificed for them in the houses of the high-places^d." Whilst the priests were at their posts, and performing their accustomed round of services, all was well. Respecting religion as a *personal* concern between them individually and the god whom they served, they knew nothing. It was with them a mere *official* matter: and if it was performed with regularity by the appointed officers, they felt no want, no cause for self-reproach.

It had *custom for its origin*: "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations who had carried Israel away captive from thence: *Unto this day they do after the former manners*^e." "So these nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: *as did their fathers, so did they unto this day*^f." None of them inquired whether their views were right or wrong: they took for granted that the religion which they had received from their forefathers was right: and, if they only conformed themselves to that, they had nothing to fear.]

^a ver. 24—41.

^b John iv. 22.

^c ver. 29—31.

^d ver. 32.

^e ver. 33, 34, marginal reading.

^f ver. 41.

And what is the religion which obtains amongst us?

[Verily, we might almost conceive ourselves to be in Samaria, rather than in Britain, where the light of the Gospel so clearly shines. For what is the object which the generality of us aim at, even in religion? is it not merely to have within our own bosoms a foundation for self-applause? As to any real delight in holy exercises, we do not pretend to it. To read the word of God with a devout application of it to our own particular case; to commune with God in secret, and pour out our souls before him in praise and thanksgiving; *these* are not really the employments we affect: as for enjoying his presence, and receiving communications from him in answer to our prayers, we scarcely contemplate such a thing as attainable by us: if we *do our duty*, as we call it, *that* is all that we are concerned about; *that* satisfies our conscience; and we neither desire nor think of any thing beyond.

In perfect accordance with these views are all our services. We come to the house of God: we follow the minister in the different parts of the service, standing, sitting, kneeling, as occasion requires, and making our responses at the places assigned us: we then attend to his discourse with interest or indifference, as it may happen: and then congratulate ourselves as having performed a duty, though the soul has not been really engaged in a single word that has been uttered either by the minister or ourselves. Samaritan-like, we devolve almost the whole service on the minister; and, if *he* have discharged his office with regularity and decorum, we conclude that *we* have done all that was required of *us*.

If it were asked of us, Why we professed the Christian faith at all, the greater part of us would have no better reason than that by which the Samaritans were influenced; "We follow the religion of our forefathers." We are Christians, in fact, for the very same reasons that Mahometans or Pagans profess the faith maintained respectively by them. We have taken our religion upon trust from those who have gone before us, without ever having examined it for ourselves: and it is owing to the circumstance of our having been born in a Christian land, and not to any conviction of the truth and excellency of our religion, that we are Protestants and not Papists, or Christians and not Heathens.

God in Christ is *professedly* the object of our worship; but the gods whom we *really* worship, and *by choice*, are the pleasures, and riches, and honours, of this vain world. On *them* our heart is fixed; to *them* is our time devoted; and, if we but attain them to the extent of our desires, we bless ourselves as having gained the objects most worthy of our pursuit.]

But now, in opposition to all this, let us notice,

II. The standard proposed to us in the Bible—

This, also, is fully set forth in the chapter before us—

1. It has God alone for its object—

["Ye shall not fear other gods, nor bow yourselves to them, nor serve them, nor sacrifice to them; but to the Lord: *him* shall ye fear, and *him* shall ye worship, and to *him* shall ye do sacrifice^g." In the first and great commandment that is given us, of loving God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, there is no alienation admitted, no participation with any creature upon earth. "God is a jealous God," and must have our whole hearts. "If our heart be divided, we shall," as the prophet warns us, assuredly "be found faulty^h." Now, then, if there be any one thing under heaven that is not truly and entirely subordinated to him, we have not yet taken so much as one step in true religion. We may have some *fear* of God: but whilst there is any other god in the universe that we *serve*, or that stands in competition with him, we are yet Samaritans in heart, "having the form of godliness, but not any of its powerⁱ."]

2. It has the covenant of grace altogether for its ground—

["The covenant that I have made with you, ye shall not forget^k." We have no hope whatever before God, but as founded on that everlasting covenant which the Father entered into with his dear Son, as the head and representative of his elect people^l. In ourselves we were reduced to a footing with the fallen angels, and had in ourselves no more claim on God than they. By the first covenant we were all condemned^m. But God has made a new covenant with us, "ordered in all things and sureⁿ;" and has "confirmed that covenant with an oath^o;" and according to the tenour of that covenant, shall mercy be vouchsafed unto us^p. But who knows any thing about that covenant? Who even *thinks* of it, or has any more respect unto it than if it never had existed? The utmost that people in general know about religion is, that they need to repent; and that, if they repent, they shall obtain mercy: but *under what considerations*, and *by what distinct means*, mercy shall be accorded to them, they know nothing. They

^g ver. 35, 36.

^h Hos. x. 2.

ⁱ 2 Tim. iii. 5.

^k ver. 38.

^l Zech. vi. 13. Heb. xiii. 20.

^m Gal. iii. 10.

ⁿ 2 Sam. xxiii. 5.

^o Heb. vi. 17, 18.

^p Heb. viii. 8—12.

see not every thing as springing from the sovereign grace of God, and given to Christ for us, and received from Christ through the exercise of faith: verily, so miserably defective are the most of us in the knowledge of these things, that the Samaritans themselves had almost as good a discernment of them as we.]

3. It has the work of redemption for its great influential motive—

["Ye shall fear the Lord, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt with great power and a stretched-out arm^q." Throughout all the Old Testament, the deliverance from Egypt is urged as the chief incentive to serve and glorify God. Yet what was that, in comparison of the redemption vouchsafed to us through the blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? This is the substance, of which the redemption from Egypt was the mere shadow. And it is from the consideration of this stupendous work that we are exhorted to "yield up ourselves as living sacrifices to the Lord^r." It is "because Christ has bought us with a price, that we are called to glorify him with our bodies and our spirits, which are his^s." See the saints in heaven: even there are they actuated in all their services by a sense of redeeming love^t: much more are we on earth induced by this wonderful mystery to "live to Him, who died for us, and rose again^u!"]

4. It has holiness, real and universal holiness, for its end—

[Not even the salvation of men from perdition is so much the end of all religion as the saving of them from sin. It was in the latter view, rather than the former, that the very name of Jesus was given to our blessed Lord^x. He came to redeem us from all iniquity, and to purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works^y." This also, like all the foregoing characters of true religion, is specified in the passage before us: "The statutes, and the ordinances, and the law, and the commandment, which he wrote for you, ye shall observe to do for evermore^z." And to this agrees the testimony of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us — — — that, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, we might *serve him*

^q ver. 36.

^s 1 Cor. vi. 19, 20. 1 Pet. i. 17—19.

^t Rom. xiv. 7—9.

^y Tit. ii. 14.

^r Rom. xii. 1.

^u Rev. v. 9, 10.

^x Matt. i. 21.

^z ver. 37.

without fear, in righteousness and holiness before him, all the days of our life^a."

Now, from hence we may see how far we are possessed of true religion: for, if we desire not holiness as our chief aim, and as that which alone can render heaven itself desirable, we have yet to learn what are the first principles of true religion. Satan himself would gladly be restored to his original happiness in heaven: but he has no desire to be "renewed in the spirit of his mind, and to be created anew, after the divine image, in righteousness and true holiness^b." *These* are exclusively the desires of a Christian mind; and in every regenerate soul under heaven are they paramount and predominant. There is not a Christian in the universe who does not desire to become "holy, as God himself is holy," and "perfect, even as his Father which is in heaven is perfect."]

And now, by way of IMPROVEMENT,

1. I will call you to humiliation—

[Methinks the Prophet Isaiah furnishes me with the most appropriate address that can possibly be delivered to you: "Hear ye this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah; who swear by the name of the Lord, and make mention of the God of Israel, but not in truth, nor in righteousness^c!" Here your Christian *profession* is acknowledged: and here, alas! is your Christian *practice* described. For who amongst us has devoted himself to God with that entireness of heart and life which the very name of Christian implies? — — — I must indeed warn you, that "ye cannot serve two masters, who are so opposed to each other as God and the world are. To whichever of them you adhere, you must, of necessity, despise the other: ye cannot serve God and mammon^d." This is not the warning of an enthusiast who is carried to excess by an heated imagination, but the warning of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who will confirm it by his judgment at the last day. And if this be true, what have you been, but *despisers of God*, whilst you have been professing to reverence and serve him? Let a sense of this humble you in the dust: and remember, that, if ever you would serve God acceptably, every rival must be put away, and HE alone must reign in your heart.]

2. I call you to decision—

[What is the determination which I would wish you all to form? It is that which the Prophet Micah so well inculcates: "All people will walk every one in the name of his

^a Luke i. 67—69, 74, 75.

^b Eph. iv. 23, 24.

^c Isai. xlviii. 1.

^d Matt. vi. 24.

God; and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God, for ever and ever^e." Yes; "walk in the name of your incarnate God," whose name you bear: and let it be seen "whose you are, and whom you serve." Do this at all events, without compromising the matter, or "halting between two opinions." "If Baal be God, follow him: but if the Lord be God, then follow him^f." Yes, and "follow him fully too^g:" and if you are called to bear a cross for him, stay not till it is laid upon you by necessity; but "take it up willingly, and follow him^h:" "follow him without the camp, bearing his reproachⁱ;" and, whatever be the cross laid upon you, rejoice, and "glory in it, for his sake^k." This is the Bible standard. Attempt not to lower it. Aspire after a full conformity to it. Your Lord well deserves this at your hands. It was not by measure that he expressed love to you. There was nothing which he did not forego for you; nothing which he did not sustain for you. Walk ye, then, in his steps; and have no other standard than this, to "love him as he has loved you," and to serve him as he has served you. Whatever he did for your salvation, that be ye ready to do for his honour. And whatever attainments ye have made, still endeavour to advance, "walking on" with ever-increasing zeal, "forgetting what is behind, and pressing forward to that which is before, till the prize of your high calling is awarded to you^l," and you rest for ever in the bosom of your God.]

^e Mic. iv. 5.^f 1 Kings xviii. 21.^g Josh. xiv. 8, 9.^h Luke ix. 23.ⁱ Heb. xiii. 13.^k Acts v. 41.^l Phil. iii. 13, 14.

CCCLXXVI.

HEZEKIAH DESTROYS THE BRASEN SERPENT.

2 Kings xviii. 4. *He brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.*

WE too often see the children of godly parents turning aside from the principles in which they have been educated, and deserting the paths which parental piety has marked out for them. Here we behold a youth, whose father was branded with a special mark of infamy on account of his numerous and aggravated^a impieties, shining with a brighter lustre

^a 2 Chron. xxviii.

than any other of the kings of Judah^b. No sooner did he come to the throne of his father than he set himself to counteract all the evil which his father had done. At the early age of twenty-five he commenced a reformation, which, for the time at least, was attended with the happiest effects. "He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made." It seems that the veneration in which that memorial of God's mercy had been held, had degenerated into the grossest superstition. Where the brasen serpent had been preserved for so long a period, we are not informed. Had it been placed within the sanctuary, with the pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, being concealed from the view both of the people and the priests, it would not have become an object of idolatrous regard. But it is not to be wondered at, that, when idols of every kind were multiplied in the land, this, which as a memorial of God's mercy was really entitled to most affectionate respect, should have divine honours paid to it. The use which was made of it by the Jewish people naturally leads me to shew, *How prone men are to superstition*: whilst the zeal of Hezekiah in destroying it, will properly afford me an occasion yet further to shew, *How earnestly we ought, all of us according to our ability, to counteract the superstition that is around us.*

Observe then,

I. How prone men are to superstition—

Superstition, I am aware, may exist, without being carried to the extent in which it prevailed amongst the Jews at this time. But the same ingredients are found in it, whatever be the degree in which it prevails. In the instance before us its component parts are manifest. The Jews carried their veneration of the brasen serpent to a very culpable excess: they assigned to it a sanctity, which it did not possess—they ascribed to it a glory, which it did not merit—they

^b ver. 5, 6.

expected from it a benefit, which it could not confer. Now, whether our superstition have respect to a visible creature, or only to a figment of the brain, its essential qualities are the same; and man in his fallen state is prone to it.

It obtained, and still obtains, universally amongst the heathen—

[What were, or are, the Deities of the heathen, but men, who on account of some exploits in former days have been canonized, or mere creatures of the imagination invested with divine attributes? The philosophers of Greece and Rome knew of no other gods than these; and in that respect were scarcely more rational than any other of the heathen, whether in ancient or modern times.]

Amongst the Jews also it ever did, and still does, prevail to an awful extent—

[Scarcely had they been brought out of Egypt before they made a golden calf, and worshipped it as their god^c. Through their whole abode in the wilderness they bowed down to Moloch and Remphan, the gods of the heathen that were around them^d. After their settlement in Canaan they evinced the same propensity continually. The greatest mercies which God vouchsafed to them were abused to this end. Was the law given them from Mount Sinai? they rested in it for justification, instead of using it as “a ministration of condemnation,” and a rule of life. Was the temple of God among them? in that they trusted as a security against their enemies, saying, as Micah did when he had secured a Levite for his priest, “Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest^e.” Had they the badge of circumcision? they thought that would suffice, though they knew nothing of the true circumcision of the heart. To this present hour the dispersed of Israel have no juster views of God and of religion than those had in former days; of whom it is said, that, trusting in their own righteousness, they would not submit to the righteousness of God. Even the doctrines of man’s invention had, and still have, a greater authority over them than the commands of God — — —]

And what is Popery but a mass of superstition altogether?

[What is the worship of the Virgin Mary, and of saints, and relics? What are all the masses, the pilgrimages, and the

^c Acts vii. 41.

^d Acts vii. 42, 43.

^e Judg. xvii. 13. Jer. vii. 4.

penances that are prescribed among them as means of expiating their sins? What is their auricular confession, their priestly absolution, their adoring of the consecrated wafer, and their administration of extreme unction? Some, I trust, there are, who are enabled to look simply to Christ through all the mists that are cast around him: but those who regard the dogmas of popery as the only ground of their hopes, are as far from God and truth as either Jews or heathens.]

Would to God that the Protestant world were blameless in relation to this matter!

[The light which we enjoy ought long since to have dispelled the clouds of popish superstition: but amongst the generality there still remains a most astonishing blindness respecting the Gospel of Christ. How many are there who imagine that repentance has in itself a power to wash away their sins! How many regard the Lord's supper, not as a mere commemorative ordinance in and through which divine blessings are dispensed, but as a sacrificial act, that expiates their guilt, and insures their forgiveness! Baptism, in like manner, is supposed by many to take away our sins, yea, and to renew our natures also, not as it is received, but simply as administered: and they who deny this, are represented as denying the sacramental character of the ordinance. Thus do many amongst ourselves run into the very same absurdity as the Jews did in relation to the brasen serpent. God once conveyed bodily health by a sight of the brasen serpent; and he now conveys spiritual health in and through the ordinance of baptism. But the serpent did not heal *all*, but *those only who looked to it by faith*: nor did it heal them *by any power of its own*, but *only as appointed of God to be a medium of communication from him to them*. When the Jews ascribed the honour to the brasen serpent, and looked to it for future benefits, they erred: and precisely in the same manner do *they* err, who ascribe power to baptism *as an act*, instead of looking simply to God for his blessing on the use of it *as an instituted ordinance, and a medium of communication with him*. As reasonably might any person ascribe the refreshing water which he drinks to the pipe which conveys it to him, as imagine that the mere act of baptism can justify and sanctify his soul. There is a fountain to which the stream must be traced: and, if we suffer our views to terminate on any thing short of that, we are guilty of the grossest superstition.

In a word, there is in every man by nature a tendency to this fatal evil, and a readiness to rob God of his glory, by giving to the creature that honour which is due to him alone.]

Such is the proneness of man to superstition: and, from Hezekiah's conduct, we learn,

II. How earnestly we should all endeavour to counteract it—

We should counteract it,

1. In ourselves—

[There is a great deal of this evil remaining in the heart, even after we are truly converted unto God. To view God in every thing; to ascribe every thing, evil as well as good, to God^f; to give him the glory of every thing; and to depend wholly and entirely upon him for every thing, is an attainment to which we are not soon brought: we gain it for the most part by a long and painful discipline. There is a measure of creature-confidence and creature-dependence cleaving to us to the end: or though we be purged from it, yet is there a tendency to return to it, and a necessity to be constantly on our guard against it. Whence is that confidence which some derive from dreams, or visions, or other conceits of their own? Whence is that stress which they lay on the word of God coming to their minds in this or that particular way? It all arises from a propensity inherent in fallen man to rest in something besides God. The word of God is our only legitimate ground of either hope or fear. The manner of its being applied to the mind does not alter one jot or tittle of it. The promises are not a whit more sure because they are presented with force to our minds, nor the threatenings less sure because we are strongly impressed with the idea that they shall never be fulfilled in us. And the only effect of attending to our own feelings in relation to these things is, to generate a presumptuous confidence in some, and groundless apprehensions in others. They all draw the mind from God; and must be guarded against as superstitious vanities: and "all who trust in such vanities, shall have vanity for their recompence."]

2. In others—

[Were superstition a harmless delusion, we might leave men to themselves: but when we consider how great an evil it is, and how strenuously the pious Hezekiah opposed it, we should all use our utmost efforts to counteract it in the world. Whether we view the dishonour which it does to God, or the evil which it entails on man, we cannot but see, that we should tread in Hezekiah's steps respecting it. That it robs God of his glory, is obvious; because it ascribes to the creature what

^f Amos. iii. 6.

is due to Him alone. And it is most injurious to man, because whilst it disappoints his hopes, it actually robs him of all the blessings which the Gospel itself provides. What did St. Paul say to those who relied on circumcision as securing or confirming to them the benefits of the Gospel? Did he say, "If ye be circumcised, your *circumcision* shall profit you nothing?" No: but, "If ye be circumcised, CHRIST shall profit you nothing^g." And so must we say in reference to superstition of every kind: it not only fails to procure the benefits it aspires to, but actually deprives us of the benefits we might otherwise obtain: and it would be well if those, who superstitiously regard divine ordinances, whether baptism, or the Lord's Supper, or any other ordinance, as possessing any inherent virtue in themselves, and as imparting virtue by any power of their own, would contemplate their guilt and danger whilst under the influence of such delusions: for to those who against better light adhere to them, as necessarily conveying justification and sanctification and salvation, "Christ himself will become of no effect:" they are fallen from grace; and, as far as respects them, "Christ is dead in vain^h."

Well I know that to some these sentiments will appear harsh: but fidelity to God and man requires, that, if even an angel from heaven should countenance such an error, he should be opposedⁱ. And if in opposing such errors any one think that we manifest too much zeal, what would such an one have said to Hezekiah? 'What! know you not that that serpent was appointed as an ordinance by God himself? Know you not how many thousands were healed by it? And do you dare to break it in pieces, and to degrade it with such an appellation as "*Nehushtan*," as though it were no better than a mere *piece of brass*? I am shocked at your impiety.' But what would Hezekiah have said? 'It is not *as an ordinance of God* that I degrade it, but as idolatrously substituted in God's place, as a ground of hope, and as a source of good.' So say I of baptism and of the Lord's supper: 'In their proper and appointed use they cannot be too highly valued: but, if abused to purposes for which they were not given, and looked to as containing in themselves, and conveying of themselves, salvation to man, they are desecrated, and may justly be called *Nehushtan*.' So Paul said in relation to circumcision, which corresponds with the Christian ordinance of baptism. When some abused it as a ground of hope, he would not acknowledge them as the people of God. He indignantly denominates them "the concision," declaring that *they* only were the circumcision who sought their salvation in God alone. And if any be offended with this doctrine, we refer

^g Gal. v. 2.^h Gal. 5. 4. with Gal. ii. 21.ⁱ Gal. i. 8, 9.

them to Hezekiah; we refer them to St. Paul. It is too weighty a matter to be trifled with, seeing that it is of vital importance to every soul of man.]

Let us LEARN, then, from hence,

1. How to use God's ordinances—

[We should be thankful for them: we should honour them: we should look to God in them, and expect from God through them the communications of his grace and peace. They are to be revered, but not idolized; to be used as means, but not rested in as an end. No one is to imagine himself the better, merely because he has attended on any ordinances: for he may eat his own condemnation at the supper of the Lord, and have the word which is ministered unto him “a savour only of death.” We must look, not to ordinances, but to God in them: and just so much as we obtain from God in them are we benefited by them. This present ordinance for instance; What are you the better for it, if you have not held communion with God himself in your devotions? And what benefit will you receive from the word now delivered, if it come not to you in demonstration of the Spirit and of power? Bear this in mind, both before you come up to the house of God, and when you depart from it; and then you will find the ordinances to be blessings indeed. But, if you “sacrifice to your own net, and burn incense to your own drag^k,” your coming hither will be in vain, and our labour also will be in vain.]

2. How to regard the Lord Jesus Christ himself—

[Methinks these Jews, though so blind and sinful, may well rise up in judgment against the generality of the Christian world. The serpent which they worshipped had never done any thing for them; the persons whom it had healed, had lived eight hundred years before; and it prevailed only to prolong for a season their corporeal life: and no benefit had accrued from it to any child of man since the day that it was erected in the camp. Yet they honoured it, and “offered incense to it.” But the Lord Jesus Christ has been healing immortal souls; and *that* from the foundation of the world to this present hour; and so healed them, that they should live for ever. This too he has done, not by being unconsciously and without volition suspended on the cross; but by voluntarily leaving his Father's bosom, and assuming our nature, and dying on the cross under the load of all our sins, and drinking to the very dregs that cup of bitterness which must otherwise have been put into our hands to drink for ever. Yet how many days

^k Hab. i. 16.

and months and years have been spent by most of us without ever offering to him the incense of our prayers and praise! Yea, notwithstanding he is erected for the healing of us, and is at this moment empowered to bestow on us all the blessings that we can need for body or for soul, for time or for eternity, how little is he adored and magnified by us! May we not well be ashamed when we reflect on this? May we not be confounded when we compare our treatment of him with the conduct of the Jews towards the senseless shadowy representation of him? Yes indeed; we have reason to blush and be confounded before him. Let us then repent of all our ingratitude towards him. Let us remember that there is no fear of honouring him too much, since He is God, as well as man; and not the medium of communication only, but the true and proper source of all blessings to our souls. Then shall our communion with him be sweet: and “the golden oil shall flow through the golden pipes¹” of his ordinances, from Him the fountain of it, to the enriching of our souls with all spiritual blessings, and to the everlasting glory of his great and glorious name.]

¹ Zech. iv. 11—14.

CCCLXXVII.

HEZEKIAH'S DELIVERANCE FROM SENNACHERIB.

2 Kings xix. 30, 31. *The remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall yet again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of Mount Zion: the zeal of the Lord of hosts shall do this.*

GREAT and mighty conquerors have at all times been ready to ascribe their success to their own wisdom and prowess: but in no case have they been any thing more than the sword which God has used for the effecting of his own purposes^a: and when he has accomplished by them his own designs, he not unfrequently punishes their pride and cruelty by some signal judgments. Thus he acted towards the boasting and blasphemous Sennacherib. He raised up that monarch to subdue mighty kingdoms, to lead into captivity the ten tribes of Israel, and to inflict a heavy chastisement on the two remaining tribes

^a Isai. x. 5, 15.

The events which took place in the Apostolic age, when the Apostles and others went forth to publish the glad tidings of salvation, precisely corresponded with this prophecy: they went from Jerusalem, and diffused the knowledge of a crucified Saviour throughout the earth.]

Let us attend to,

II. The instruction to be derived from it—

We may particularly learn from hence,

1. The interest which God takes in his Church and people—

[Not only from the time that these words were spoken, but even before the foundation of the world, God had an eye to his chosen people, to deliver them from their spiritual enemies, that they might “walk in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of their life.” On his Jewish Church he yet looks, in order to “engraft them yet again on their own olive-tree,” when the appointed period for their restoration shall arrive. And on the least and meanest of his people at this day does he still cast an eye of love and pity: he “has thoughts of love and peace towards them,” and “is not willing that one of his little ones should perish.” If enemies assault them, he considers himself as struck through them^d: he feels as if the apple of his eye were touched^e: he regards them as “his first-fruits,” which if any dared to alienate and consume, he did it at the peril of his own soul^f.]

2. The efficacy of believing prayer—

[Low indeed was the state of the nation at that time: it seemed as if there was no possibility of escape for them from their conquering enemies. But behold, how speedily and effectually prayer prevailed! Isaiah lifted up his voice to God in prayer^g; Hezekiah also spread before the Lord the letter that Rabshakeh had sent him^h; and scarcely had the pious monarch finished his prayer, before the prophet was sent to him from the Lord, with assurances of immediate and complete deliveranceⁱ: and that very night was an angel sent from heaven to destroy a hundred and eighty-five thousand of the Assyrian army. Thus shall all God's enemies, and ours, perish, if only we cry unto God for help. We may even now adopt the exulting language which God ordered Hezekiah to use in reference to the Assyrian monarch, “The virgin, the daughter of Israel, hath shaken her head at thee.” Only spread all your wants and difficulties before the Lord, and there is no lust, no enemy, that shall

^d Acts ix. 4.

^g ver. 4.

^e Zech. ii. 8.

^h ver. 14—19.

^f Jer. ii. 3.

ⁱ ver. 20.

stand before you; but "Satan himself shall be bruised under your feet shortly."

"The zeal of the Lord of Hosts is pledged to perform this" for all his believing people. You may therefore go to him and plead, "Where is thy *zeal*, and thy strength, the sounding of thy bowels and of thy mercies towards me^k?" And his answer to you shall speedily arrive, "I will rejoice over you to do you good, and I will plant you in the heavenly land *with my whole heart and with my whole soul*^l." Only believe in him; and "according to your faith it shall be unto you."]

^k Isai. lxiii. 15.

^l Jer. xxxii. 41.

CCCLXXVIII.

HEZEKIAH'S APPEAL TO GOD.

2 Kings xx. 2, 3. *Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, saying, I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight.*

AS "clouds return after rain," so do troubles follow each other frequently in rapid succession. Great was the affliction of Hezekiah at the time of Sennacherib's invasion: and no sooner was he delivered from that, than he was attacked with a deadly malady, and had a message from the Lord that he must die^a. Under this new trouble he betook himself, as he had done also on the former occasion, to fervent prayer: and in this prayer he made a most solemn appeal to God, an appeal which needs to be well considered.

We will notice,

I. The occasion of it—

A message had been sent him from the Lord to set his house in order, and to prepare for speedy death.

Now this would be an awful warning to any man—

^a There appears no just reason for transposing these two events; for they certainly might easily occur within the space of one year; and it is not right to take such liberties with Scripture, as that of transposing chapters and events, without strong internal evidence of the necessity of such a change.

[There is in every man an instinctive dread of death ; and more especially to those who regard it in its true light. Who can think of going to the tribunal of a just and holy God, to give an account of all that he has done in the body, whether good or evil, and to receive from God a sentence of everlasting happiness or misery, and not tremble at such a prospect?— — This thought is as interesting to the prince as the peasant — — and though many persons treat it as fit only to be regarded by the poor, or by the sick and aged, yet, when the hour of death draws nigh, all feel its importance ; or, if any are hardened enough to disregard it then, their delusion ceases the very instant that death has executed on them its commission — — —]

But it was peculiarly distressing to Hezekiah—

[He had begun a great and glorious reformation, and had fondly hoped to see it completed in the land. Besides, he had many plans for the temporal prosperity of his subjects ; which now he had no prospect of carrying into execution. To relinquish all these projects was painful in the extreme. It evidently was not the mere fear of death that stimulated him to pray : nor does he appear to have entertained any doubt about the safety of his own soul : it was for God, and for the Jewish nation, that he felt concerned : and doubtless, in proportion to his zeal for God, and the love he bore to man, would be his grief at the tidings of such a premature and unseasonable termination of his life : nor do we wonder that under such circumstances he should “ make supplication to his God with strong crying and tears.”]

Yet, till it is explained, we shall not easily account for,

II. The appeal itself—

It does at first sight appear like the Pharisaic boast, “ I thank thee, O God, that I am not as other men.” But, in truth, it was a *plea*, with which his prayer was enforced ; a plea, like that of David, “ Preserve my soul, for I am holy^b.” In this appeal he humbly declared before God.

1. The use which he had hitherto made of life—

[From the first moment of his coming to the throne, he had set himself to suppress idolatry, and to reform the nation. Of this he had the testimony of his own conscience ; and this gave him much comfort in his soul^c, together with confidence in urging his petitions before God^d.

^b Ps. lxxxvi. 2.

^c 2 Cor. i. 12.

^d 1 John iii. 21, 22.

But there was in this plea a reference to an express promise made to David, a promise, the accomplishment of which Hezekiah was now particularly authorized to ask, and to expect. God had assured David that "if his children should walk before him in truth, there should not fail one of them to sit upon the throne of Israel^e." But Hezekiah had walked before God in truth, and yet was about to die without leaving any child to succeed him in his throne^f. This under any circumstances would have been a great affliction; but it was peculiarly afflictive, now that Hezekiah was in the midst of all his plans for the welfare of the nation, and had no prospect of a successor who would carry them on. Hence there was a propriety in this appeal, far beyond what has been generally supposed: for if we have complied with any conditions on which a promise is suspended, we may justly urge it with God as a plea for the accomplishment of his promise.]

2. The end for which he desired a continuance of life—

[His desire was, not that he might have a protracted enjoyment of earthly things, but that he might have further opportunities of serving God. This appears from the thanksgiving which he uttered on his recovery^g. And this was a legitimate ground of desiring life. St. Paul, though he "desired to depart and to be with Christ, which was far better," yet was willing to stay a longer time here below, because it was "needful for the Church of Christ." What better plea then could be urged than this? 'O my God, thou hast put me into a situation wherein I can serve thee to great advantage; and thou knowest I have no desire but to advance thy glory in the world: O take me not away, till I have been enabled to render thee all the service of which thou hast made me capable!' Such was David's plea^h; and it may well be urged by all who desire to fulfil the true ends of life.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who are in health and strength—

[Who can tell, how soon the message may be sent to you, "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live." You may be in the prime of life, as Hezekiah was; (he was only forty years of age;) or, like him, may possess great wealth and honour; or may be engaged in pursuits of vast utility to the world; but death will not spare us on any of these accounts,

^e 1 Kings ii. 4.

^f Manasseh was not born till three years afterwards. Compare 2 Kings xx. 6. with xxi. 1.

^g Isai. xxxviii. 18, 19.

^h Ps. xxx. 8, 9.

if it has received its commission to cut us down. Inquire then whether, if the message were now delivered unto you, "Thou shalt die, and not live," you are ready to give up your account with joy? Can you appeal to the heart-searching God that you have walked as in his presence, and endeavoured with sincerity of heart to approve yourselves to him? Has the doing of his will in all things been the one object of your life? Above all, inquire whether Christ has been precious to you? whether you have lived by faith on him? and whether you have truly devoted yourselves to his service? These are the things that characterize a true Christian; and unless you have the testimony of your conscience that you have made this use of life, you have indeed very abundant cause to be afraid of death. O pray to God that you may not be taken away in such an unprepared state; and lose not a moment in seeking that entire change of heart and life, without which you can never have any well-grounded confidence towards God.]

2. Those who have recovered from sickness, or have escaped any particular danger—

[Why has God spared or restored you, but that you might live henceforth to his glory? Perhaps under the apprehension of death, you determined with yourselves that you would give yourselves up to God. Now then remember the vows that are upon you. God heard your prayer, and the prayers of others for you, that it might be seen whether you would serve him or not. O beware how you abuse his patience and long-suffering towards you: beware how you make use of life only to "add sin to sin," and to "treasure up wrath against the day of wrath." There is a great work lying before you, and but little time to do it in. To have the text realized in you, to have it realized in all its parts — — — and to have such an evidence of it in your heart and life, as to be able to appeal to God respecting it; this is no easy matter; nor is it a work that ought to be deferred one single moment. Consider, you are still as much exposed to death as ever. Though restored, you have no promise of life for fifteen years to come, no, nor for fifteen days or hours. Improve then the present hour: "Walk not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time," that at whatever hour the heavenly Bridegroom may arrive, you may be found ready, and be counted worthy to sit down with him at his marriage-feast in heaven.]

CCCLXXIX.

HEZEKIAH'S RESIGNATION.

2 Kings xx. 19. *Then said Hezekiah unto Isaiah, Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken.*

IF of active virtues it may be said, that they are more fascinating and beautiful in the eyes of men; of passive virtues it may be said, that an equal degree of divine grace is displayed in them. It is as much an effect of divine grace to suffer patiently the will of God, as it is to perform it diligently. Accordingly we find, that most of the eminent saints of old were as remarkable for a meek submission to the divine disposals, as for a zealous execution of the divine commands. Aaron^a, Eli^b, Job^c, David^d, and many others, are recorded as bright examples of the passive graces: and the history of Hezekiah, as contained in the words before us, furnishes us with an admirable specimen of pious resignation.

We shall consider his resignation,

I. As an act of piety—

The judgments denounced against his family and kingdom were of the most distressing nature—

[All the wealth that he possessed, together with the holy city and temple, were to be delivered into the hands of the Chaldeans; and his sons, whom he should beget, should be made eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. To a monarch, what could be more distressing than the overthrow of his whole kingdom? To a pious monarch, what more grievous than the destruction of God's temple, and the triumph of idolatry over the true religion? And to a monarch that was a parent, what more terrible than such degradation and misery as were denounced against his offspring?

Some may think that these judgments were not very afflictive, because they were not to affect the king himself, but only to attach upon his descendants: but, we apprehend that any *personal* affliction whatever would have been esteemed light, in comparison of the calamities here threatened^e.]

Yet were the tidings of them received with the most perfect submission—

[What could any man say more? Hezekiah justified in the strongest terms the denunciations that had been delivered. Though he was taken entirely off his guard, and had not the smallest expectation of any such message from the Lord, yet, on the delivery of it, he bowed at once, and “accepted it as

^a Lev. x. 3.

^b 1 Sam. iii. 18.

^c Job. i. 21.

^d Ps. xxxix. 9.

^e See 2 Sam. xxiv. 17.

the punishment of his iniquity^f." Grievous as the chastisement was, he *approved of it* as coming from the hands of a righteous God, and declared it to be not only just, but "good."]

Instead of murmuring against God for the severity of his judgments, he instantly expressed his gratitude for the mercy blended with them—

[He was informed that in *his* days the nation should enjoy "peace;" and that "truth" should triumph over the idolatry and wickedness which had overrun the land. These considerations, independent of his own *personal* welfare, were consolatory to his mind; because, if God had been "extreme to mark what had been done amiss," he might have justly executed his threatened judgments instantly, without any intervention of grace and mercy. On these mitigated circumstances Hezekiah fixed his mind; and, whilst he acknowledged the equity of the judgments in their fullest extent, he more especially adored the goodness of God in suspending them for so long a period: "Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?" The prospect of the prevalence of true religion, though but for a season, was cheering to him: and he "accounted the long-suffering of God to be salvation."]

If, as an act of piety, we admire his resignation, much more shall we do so,

II. As a lesson of instruction—

Truly in this view the history before us is very important. From it we learn many valuable lessons:

1. That pride, however light and venial it may appear in our eyes, is most offensive in the sight of God—

[It was *pride* which led Hezekiah to display before the Babylonish ambassadors all the monuments of his wealth and power: he felt an undue complacency in the things themselves, as though they of themselves could make us happy; and next, he relied on them as inducements to the king of Babylon to court his alliance. According to the common estimation of men, there would be no great evil in this conduct: but God regarded as a very heinous sin, the indulgence of such vain conceits; and marked the extent of his displeasure by the severity of his judgments.

Let not any one then imagine that an inordinate attachment to earthly things, or a vain confidence in them, is a light

^f Lev. xxvi. 41.

offence. Whatever we have that distinguishes us from our fellow-creatures, it is given us of the Lord; and, instead of engrossing our affections, it should lead us to him in thankfulness and praise. If we take glory to ourselves for our possession of it, we provoke him to jealousy, and excite his indignation against us. How highly did God resent the pride of Nebuchadnezzar^g, and of Herod^h! And shall we escape, if we “provoke the Lord to jealousy?” Let us be thankful for what we possess; but let our affections centre in God alone.]

2. That just views of sin will lead us to justify God in all the judgments that are denounced against it—

[We are ready to think that the punishment inflicted on Hezekiah was more severe than the occasion required: but he thought not so, because he saw his sin in all its malignity — — — In like manner, when the everlasting displeasure of God is denounced against sin and sinners, the proud heart of man is ready to rise up against God, and to say, that it would not be just to inflict eternal punishment for the sins of time, especially if those sins have not been of the most flagrant kind. But a just view of our demerit silences at once all those rebellious murmurs. We then say with David, “Thou art justified in thy saying, and wilt be clear when thou judgest.” It is remarkable, that the man who was cast out for not having on the wedding garment, is represented as not having one word to utter in arrest of judgment; “he was speechlessⁱ:” and so will it be with all at the last day, yea and with all in this life also, who are made sensible of their iniquities. Under the deepest of earthly afflictions they will say, “Shall a living man complain? a man for the punishment of his sins?” No; “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him.” Under the apprehension of his eternal displeasure also they will cry, “I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.”

Let us beg of God then to give us an insight into our own wickedness; that under all circumstances we may approve of God as “doing all things well.”]

3. That a humble mind will be more thankful for the mitigating circumstances of an affliction than querulous about the affliction itself—

[We greatly admire this in the history before us. And who does not see what sweet composure such conduct is calculated to bring into the mind? The generality of persons are ready to fix on every circumstance that can aggravate their

^g Dan. iv. 29—33.

^h Acts xii. 22, 23.

ⁱ Matt. xxii. 12.

affliction; and hence they make themselves far more miserable than they would otherwise be: but if, like Hezekiah, they looked on the brighter side of their troubles, and noticed the mercies with which they were blended, they would be comparatively happy under them. Even self-love might dictate such a line of conduct, if we were actuated by no better motive: for, if once we saw, how much more afflictive our circumstances might have been, and how much heavier judgments we have merited, we should feel gratitude rise up in our bosoms, and “bless our God, no less when he takes away, than when he gives:” we should confess it to be “of the Lord’s mercies that we are not utterly consumed.”]

CCCLXXX.

THE BENEFITS ARISING FROM PEACE AND TRUTH^a.

2 Kings xx. 19. *Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?*

BY many it is thought that a knowledge of futurity would contribute to their happiness: but we are persuaded that it would prove only a source of misery: the good that would be foreseen would lose more than half its zest, whilst the evil that was anticipated would embitter the remainder of their days. It was as a punishment, and not as a favour, that an insight into futurity was given to King Hezekiah. He had displeased the Lord by his conduct towards the ambassadors of the king of Babylon: and God sent him word what calamities should befall both his family and nation through the instrumentality of that monarch. This judgment however was tempered with mercy; the execution of it being deferred to a generation yet unborn. Hence the judgment was submitted to with pious resignation: “Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken. Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?”

It is not our intention to enter any further into the Jewish history than just to fix the precise import of our text. The text is applicable to all persons in every age, and particularly so to this present season. We shall therefore take occasion from it to shew,

^a Thanksgiving for Peace, in 1816.

I. What blessings God is now conferring upon us—

What we are to understand by “peace and truth” will be best seen by a reference to the preceding context—

[God had declared that the king of Babylon should invade Judea, and take all the wealth of Hezekiah for a prey, and carry captive his children, and entirely destroy the whole Jewish polity. But, inasmuch as these judgments should be deferred, Hezekiah, instead of beholding the subjugation and captivity of his children, should have “peace;” and, instead of seeing the abolition of the temple worship, should have “truth” continued to him.]

Now these are the very blessings for which we are peculiarly called to render thanks this day—

[*Peace* is now happily once more restored: and such a peace as places our country in a state of greater security than it has ever enjoyed since it became a nation — — —]

“Truth,” also, with an undisturbed enjoyment of all religious ordinances, is now secured to us. We are no longer in danger of having the temples of our God converted into barracks for a licentious soldiery, or magazines for the implements of war. No longer have we any reason to fear lest a victorious enemy should deprive us of our religious liberty, or a yoke of superstition be imposed upon us as the only worship tolerated in the land. Blessed be God! we enjoy the Gospel in all its purity; and every man throughout the whole land is permitted to serve his God in the way that seems to him to be most agreeable to the Divine commands — — —]

Such blessings being now insured to us, let us consider,

II. In what light they should be viewed—

The continuance of them to Hezekiah was deemed by him a mercy, a great and *undeniable* mercy: “Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?” To us then is the possession of them,

1. A rich mercy—

[How rich a mercy “peace” is, we, who have never had our country the seat of war, are but ill qualified to judge. It is our happiness indeed that we cannot judge of it; since it can only be known by an experience of those calamities which war brings in its train.

Nor can we adequately conceive how much we are indebted to God for the possession of “truth.” To estimate this aright,

we should behold all the degrading superstitions of heathen nations, and see what self-tormenting methods they practice for the obtaining of peace with their senseless deities of wood and stone. We should see also how the far greater part of those who call themselves Christians are blinded by ceremonies of man's invention, and debarred the use of those sacred oracles which are "able to make them wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Some sense, we trust, many of us have of the value of a Saviour, through whom the vilest of sinners find access to God, and obtain all the blessings of grace and glory. But we must go up to heaven and behold the felicity of the Saints made perfect; and go down to hell to behold the miseries of the damned, before we can fully appreciate that Gospel, by which we are quickened from death in trespasses and sins, and are "translated from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God's dear Son."]

2. An undeserved mercy—

[Hezekiah felt that he might justly have been deprived of these blessings, and been made to experience in his own person all the calamities which were denounced against him in his posterity. And what was Hezekiah's fault? It was this: that when the ambassadors came to congratulate him on his recovery from a dangerous illness, he neglected to commend to them the God of Israel, by whom their souls, and the souls of their countrymen, might be saved; and sought rather to aggrandize himself by an ostentatious display of his own wealth and power. Now we are far from wishing to extenuate his guilt: it was doubtless exceeding great: and the pride of his heart merited from God the severest chastisement^a. But what was his guilt compared with ours? We scarcely hear on any occasion the glory of our successes ascribed to God; nor do we find one in a thousand who relies truly and simply on God for a continuance of them: self-glorying, and confidence in an arm of flesh, are the leading features of our whole people; so that we might justly have been left to experience defeats answerable to all our victories. And how is the "truth" improved amongst us? As, on the one hand, there is not a nation under heaven where it shines with purer lustre, so neither, on the other hand, is there a nation under heaven where it is treated with greater contempt. And as to those who profess to value it, how little are its fair and beauteous lineaments visible in their hearts and lives! Well indeed might our mis-improvement of the light have long since provoked God to "take away his candlestick from us:" and it is a most unmerited mercy that "the glorious Gospel of the blessed God" is yet continued to us.]

^a 2 Chron. xxxii. 25, 26.

3. A mercy that may well reconcile us to all events connected with it—

[We are not to suppose that Hezekiah was indifferent about the welfare of his posterity: it was nothing but his sense of the greatness of the mercy vouchsafed to him, that led him to acquiesce so meekly in the sentence as it was denounced against him. The prospect of the calamities that would come on his posterity was doubtless a source of bitter anguish to his mind: but it was a great matter that he had obtained a respite, and that the judgment was not inflicted instantly upon him. This favour therefore he acknowledged as a mercy, which might well compose and tranquillize his mind.

Now it is certain that the blessings which we enjoy are far from coming without alloy. They will, it is to be feared, prove in the issue a source of misery to many. The peace, which leads to the disbanding of so many thousand troops, will leave multitudes in a state unfavourable to their best interests. Many will find it difficult to return to the employment of honest industry; yea perhaps may find it difficult even to get employment: and many who in the scenes of war have been accustomed to blood and pillage may bring home with them a disposition to exercise amongst their brethren the same evil habits which they deemed allowable amongst their enemies: and thus our domestic security may be invaded, and the perpetrators of these crimes be subjected to an untimely death by the hands of the public executioner. This is an evil felt at the termination of every war: yet must it by no means indispose us to acknowledge the blessings of peace.

The very truth of God also, even the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, brings on many, through their rejection of it, an heavier condemnation. Good would it have been for many, if they had never heard the Gospel; yea good, if Jesus Christ had never come into the world to save our ruined race. It was declared at the very time that he did come, that “he was set for *the fall*, as well as for *the rising again*, of many in Israel^b” and that, though he should be “a sanctuary to some, he should prove to others a stumbling stone and a rock of offence^c.” Thus does the Gospel itself, that greatest gift of God to mankind, “become to some a savour of life unto life, but to others a savour of death unto death^d.” Still however we must not suffer these things to diminish our value for the Gospel. If some abuse their food to intemperance, we must not therefore be unthankful for our food: nor if men abuse the Gospel, must we impute it to any defect in the Gospel, but to the depravity of their own hearts, which turns the blessing into a curse.

^b Luke ii. 34.

^c Isai. viii. 14.

^d 2 Cor. ii. 16.

We say then, that whatever evils may, by accident, be connected with the blessings we have received, *even though those evils should fall upon our own children*, it becomes us to adore and magnify our God that those blessings are not withheld from us, but that we are privileged to possess them in our days.]

4. A mercy which should be gratefully and diligently improved—

[A state of peace, and a quiet enjoyment of Gospel ordinances, is extremely favourable for the attainment of vital godliness. So it proved to the Christian Church in its infant state^e; and so it will be to us. Do we ask, In what way we should improve the present occasion? We answer, In the way that David and Solomon improved their circumstances, when God had favoured them with the blessings which are now conferred on us. David bethought him, What can I do for God? I will build him an house that shall be worthy of his divine Majesty^f. Solomon also adopted precisely the same resolution under the same circumstances^g. The same holy zeal should now inflame our hearts. We are not indeed called to build for the Lord an house of wood and stone, but a house of “living stones,” that shall be “an habitation of God through the Spirit” to all eternity. O see what myriads of stones there are lying in the quarry of corrupt nature, that through your instrumentality may be formed and fashioned to build the temple of the Lord. Look at the blind obdurate sons of Abraham, and see what may be done to bring them to the knowledge of that Saviour whom they have crucified. Look at the Gentile world, all lying in darkness and the shadow of death; and see what may be done for the enlightening of their minds, and for the saving of their souls alive. To employ our time, and property, and talents according as God shall give us opportunity, in such works, will be the best return that we can make to God for the light and peace that we enjoy: and, if we exert ourselves diligently in these labours of love, verily we shall have reason to all eternity to say, “Was it not good, that peace and truth were in our days?”]

^e Acts ix. 31.

^f 2 Sam. vii. 1, 2.

^g 1 Kings v. 4, 5.

CCCLXXXI.

COVENANTING WITH GOD.

2 Kings xxiii. 3. *And the king stood by a pillar, and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with*

all their heart and all their soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people stood to the covenant.

LITTLE do men in general consider the benefit they receive from the sacred oracles, and the stated ordinances of divine worship. Without these, the remembrance of God would soon vanish: whereas by these we are constantly reminded of the obligations we are under to love and serve him. In the days of King Josiah the inspired volume was altogether lost, and the Temple of Jehovah had been suffered to fall into decay. The pious monarch having ordered the temple to be repaired, the book of God was found. Immediately the contents of it were read to him: and, when he saw what judgments it denounced against his nation, he sought to avert them by turning to the Lord his God. He summoned all the priests, and prophets, and people of Jerusalem, and engaged them to make a solemn covenant with God, that they would henceforth serve him with their whole heart.

This instructive record shews us, that,

I. Persons in authority should use their influence to promote religion—

[Many of the Jewish kings were patrons of real piety: but among them all there was not one who equalled Josiah in integrity of heart and devotedness of soul^a. The use which he made of his authority is sufficiently declared in the history before us. But we must not imagine that such exertions belong only to rulers and governors: whether our influence extend over a kingdom, or only to a parish, or a single family, it should be improved for God. Ministers should labour by all possible means to bring their people to God: and every parent, or master of a family, should study to advance the eternal interest of those, who, by the providence of God, are committed to his care. Nor should any be deterred by the degeneracy of the times: for the state of religion cannot well be reduced to a lower ebb than it was in the days of Josiah: and, if it were, that would only be a reason for our more earnest exertions in the cause of God. Nor can we easily conceive how much good might be done by the labours of an individual. The effects of Josiah's reformation continued

^a ver. 25.

throughout all his reign^b: and, though persons in inferior stations cannot hope to produce the sudden and extensive change that he did, yet their labours may convey incalculable benefit to the latest generations: the good impressions that are made on a few will stimulate them to impart the same benefits to their neighbours, and to seek the welfare of those who are within the sphere of their influence: those again will adopt the same line of conduct towards others; and thus the benefit will be perpetually transmitted from age to age. What might not be hoped for, if magistrates and ministers, parents and masters, would combine in this good work?]

To this we may be encouraged by the consideration that,

II. Such exertions will be acceptable to those who feel their need of mercy—

[They who are wholly unconcerned about their souls will probably regard such efforts as officious, ostentatious, hypocritical. But if once they become, like the Jews on this occasion, sensible of their guilt and danger, they will no longer consider a reformer as an enemy to the happiness of mankind, but as a blessing to the world. How often is it seen that they who once despised and persecuted a minister for his piety, will send for him in a time of sickness, and be exceeding thankful for his instructions and his prayers! and many who once joined in condemning him for his zeal, will afterwards go stately many miles to attend his ministry. Such is the effect even among strangers and aliens: how much more therefore may we hope to find this acquiescence, when our counsels are enforced with the endearments of affection, or the weight of legitimate authority! Indeed, such interference is expected of us: and we lower ourselves in the estimation even of the ungodly, in proportion as we decline, whether through indolence or fear, these offices of Christian love.]

Such exertions, I say, will be acceptable to many;

III. Nor will the strictest commands of God's covenant be deemed harsh by those who are in earnest about their souls—

[Men regardless of their eternal state will scarcely hear of any restraint: they will plead for the utmost latitude of indulgence: and when forced by their convictions to concede somewhat of their fancied rights, they will yield only as Pharaoh did, when necessitated by a sense of present judgments, and the fear of more. He at first would not suffer the Hebrews to

^b 2 Chron. xxxiv. 32, 33.

sacrifice to their God at all: then he would permit it in the land of Egypt: then it might be in the borders of the wilderness: then the men might go, but they must leave their little ones as a pledge of their return: then the women and children might go, but not the cattle: at last he was glad to get rid of all^c. Thus sinners will plead for this and that sin as long as they can entertain any hope of safety in the indulgence of it; but when they feel themselves utterly undone, they will cast out of the vessel the tackle and the wheat itself, rather than perish in the great abyss^d. Yes, let them be really persuaded that the care of their souls is the one thing needful, and they will consent that God shall prescribe his own terms: they will say, with Saul, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" The covenant which Josiah proposed was exceeding strict; they were to "keep God's commandments, and testimonies, and statutes, yea, to keep them with all their heart, and with all their soul:" but they did not object to the terms; on the contrary, we are told "they stood to the covenant." Thus it should be with us also: the most self-denying commandment should not appear grievous^e, but "holy, and just, and good^f:" and we should cordially submit to it without any limitations or reserves.]

We shall not dismiss this SUBJECT without adding a word,

1. Of reproof—

[How many instead of using all their influence for God, exert it in the service of the devil! We speak not merely of those who tempt others to drunkenness, lewdness, or any other gross iniquity; but of those who by their vain, worldly, or careless conduct lead others to think lightly of sin, and to live in a neglect of their souls. In this way every person, whatever be his station, exerts, however unintentionally, a very extensive influence, which by a different conduct might be turned to good account. Say not, like Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" for all of you are accountable to God for the use which you make of your influence; and you will receive from God, not only according to the good or evil which you have done yourselves, but according to that which you have occasioned in others.]

2. Of caution—

[We are ready in a time of sickness, and under convictions

^c Exod. viii. 25, 28. and x. 11, 24. and xii. 31—33.

^d Acts xxvii. 38.

^e Acts ix. 6.

^f 1 John v. 3.

^g Rom. vii. 12.

of sin, to make covenants with God; like the Israelites who said, "All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient^h." But when we make them in our own strength, we shall violate them exactly as they did. Let not any then be hasty in making vows, or think that they can execute them by any power of their own. To give up ourselves to God is certainly right; but in order to do it effectually, we must be strong, not in ourselves, but "in the Lord, and in the power of his mightⁱ."]

3. Of consolation—

[If we were to be saved by our own faithfulness, who amongst us would be able to stand before God? Alas! "our own goodness has often been as the morning dew, and as the early cloud that passeth away." But, thanks be to God! there is a covenant made by our great Head and Surety^k; a covenant in which we all are interested; "a covenant ordered in all things and sure^l." Let this then be the real ground of our hope: let us lay hold on it, and cleave unto it. Let not, however, our affiance in this tempt us to violate our own engagements; for negligence in performing our vows to God will infallibly prove us to be strangers to the Gospel-covenant. Let us rather "give ourselves wholly to the Lord;" that while we trust in "the blood of the everlasting covenant," we may approve ourselves to him as "good and faithful servants."]

^h Exod. xxiv. 7.

ⁱ Eph. vi. 10.

^k Ps. lxxxix. 3, 28, 34, 35, 36.

^l 2 Sam. xxiii. 5. with Jer. xxxi. 31—34. and xxxii. 38—41.

CCCLXXXII.

THE CHARACTER OF JOSIAH.

2 Kings xxiii. 25. *And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him.*

THIS is the character given of King Josiah. A similar eulogium had been passed on his progenitor, Hezekiah; of whom it is said, "He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him of all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him^a." But there is nothing contrary in the

^a 2 Kings xviii. 5.

two accounts: each of these persons had his peculiar excellencies, in which he surpassed all others: Hezekiah was distinguished (as the words cited intimate,) for his confidence in God; and Josiah, as our text informs us, for his zeal and piety. No person, merely human, was ever perfect, since the introduction of sin into the world. There have indeed been bright characters, who have reflected with great lustre and fidelity some rays of "the Sun of righteousness;" but of Christ alone can it be said, that "He is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

The character here given of Josiah is as exalted as any that was ever ascribed to fallen man: and, for the purpose of illustrating it, we propose to mark some of the chief features of which it was composed.

I. He began to serve God at a very early period of life—

[At eight years old he began to reign: and no sooner did he arrive at years of discretion, than he began seriously and devoutly to serve the Lord^b. At sixteen years of age, when it might have been expected that he should be studious only of pleasure, he turned from earthly vanities to seek his happiness in God: and at twenty years of age, when it is probable he began to exercise without control his regal office, he set himself to reform the whole nation. Not fearing the face of man, he stemmed the torrent of iniquity which had overwhelmed the land; and devoted to the service of his God all the powers with which he was invested.

This was doubtless most pleasing to God, who required by the law that the first-fruits of man and beast should be his, and who has given a peculiar promise to those who seek him in early life; "They that seek me early shall find me." Happy would it be if all of us began at the early age of sixteen to serve the Lord; and if from that period every talent committed to our care were improved for God! How much better this, than to be wasting our youthful days in sin and vanity! True, we have not all the same authority as he; but all in our respective spheres should exert ourselves to the utmost of our ability; remembering, that if youth labours under some dis-

^b 2 Chron. xxxiv. 3.

advantages in point of influence, it has a tendency to put to shame the indolence of more advanced years, and to impress more forcibly the minds of those who are yet young and tender. Whilst then we say to all, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth," we would exhort all, from the first moment that they feel the value of their own souls, to exert themselves with all diligence to benefit the souls of others — — —]

II. He proceeded in his career with extraordinary zeal and diligence—

[It seems almost incredible that this young monarch should effect so much as he did in so short a time. He first began to root out idolatry from those tribes which were under his own dominion; and then set himself (by the connivance or permission of the Assyrian monarch) to effect the same changes among the remnant of the ten tribes. Not choosing to devolve these labours on others, he proceeded himself "throughout all the land of Israel," that he might see his orders carried into execution. The means he used to produce a reformation were of the most extraordinary kind; breaking in pieces all the images that he could find, strewing the dust of them on the graves of those who had sacrificed unto them; and burning on the altars the bones of the priests who had placed their offerings upon them^c.

Here we see how justly he deserved the character given him in our text: he entered into his work "with all his heart, and all his soul, and all his might." And this is the spirit which we also should manifest in all our services for God. We should not indulge a lukewarm spirit, but "be zealously affected always in a good cause." "Whatever our hand findeth to do, we should do with all our might" — — —]

III. He was as zealous in promoting piety as in suppressing vice—

[When he had put down the reigning abominations, he endeavoured to establish the worship of the true God: he repaired the temple, which had fallen into decay; he convened all his subjects, "the priests and Levites, and all the people both small and great," and himself read to them the word of God, and made a covenant with the Lord both for himself and them to serve the Lord God with their whole hearts; and "he caused all the people to stand to the covenant." After this he kept a passover, such as had not been kept even from the time of Samuel to that hour: and toward the expenses of it he himself very largely contributed.

^c See 2 Chron. xxxiv. 3—7.

Now here was real piety: here was a manifest regard for the honour of God and the good of men. This it is that most exalts a character. Many there are who will be extremely zealous against open profaneness, who yet have no real concern for God's honour and glory. But we must combine "godliness with honesty." We must labour, each in his sphere, to promote the knowledge and the worship of God: and having given up ourselves to him in a perpetual covenant, we must endeavour to engage others also to a like surrender of themselves to him. In a peculiar manner we should ourselves respect, and to the utmost of our power cause others also to regard, the wonders of redeeming love. Since "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us, we should keep the feast" — — — Here is scope for the best energies of our souls. In reference to these things it is not possible to be too earnest, provided we are alike attentive to every duty, and careful "that God in all things may be glorified through Christ Jesus" — — —]

IV. In all he did he adhered strictly to the word of God—

[From the first moment that the Scriptures were found and read to him, he determined to make them the one rule of his conduct. He "humbled himself deeply before God" for the utter disregard of them which had obtained throughout the whole kingdom: and he himself read them in the ears of his people, and required a conformity to them in every particular. In celebrating the passover, he was especially mindful of every direction given by Moses relative to that divine ordinance; and indeed in the whole of his conduct he laboured to secure a perfect compliance with God's revealed will. This is the thing noticed, both in the text and in many other places; and it forms a very essential part of that goodness, for which he is applauded in the sacred records^d.

It often happens, that men are zealous for their own party and their own opinions; and men in such a state will sometimes "compass sea and land to make one proselyte:" but unless we build according to "the model given us in the mount," we lose all our labour. To please our God, we must have a strict regard to his revealed will: and for this end we must study the Holy Scriptures, and "turn from them neither to the right hand nor the left."]

ADDRESS—

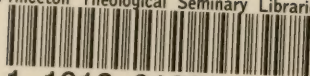
[Here we may rejoice, that we all have the Scriptures in our hands. They are not hid, as in the days of Josiah; but are so freely and universally dispersed, that every man in the

^d 2 Chron. xxxv. 26.

kingdom who desires to study them, may obtain them. How signally blessed are we in this respect! Nay, we not only have access to the Scriptures, but have them read and expounded to us from Sabbath to Sabbath. Let us then learn to tremble at the word. Let us remember that every jot and tittle of it will be fulfilled in its season. Let us bear in mind, that our wilful deviations from it will be visited with the divine displeasure: and that, if we study to fulfil it "with all our heart, and soul, and might," God, who knoweth our hearts, will bear testimony to us in the day of judgment, as here he has done to King Josiah; and will say to us before the assembled universe, "Well done, good and faithful servants, enter ye into the joy of your Lord."]

END OF VOL. III.

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